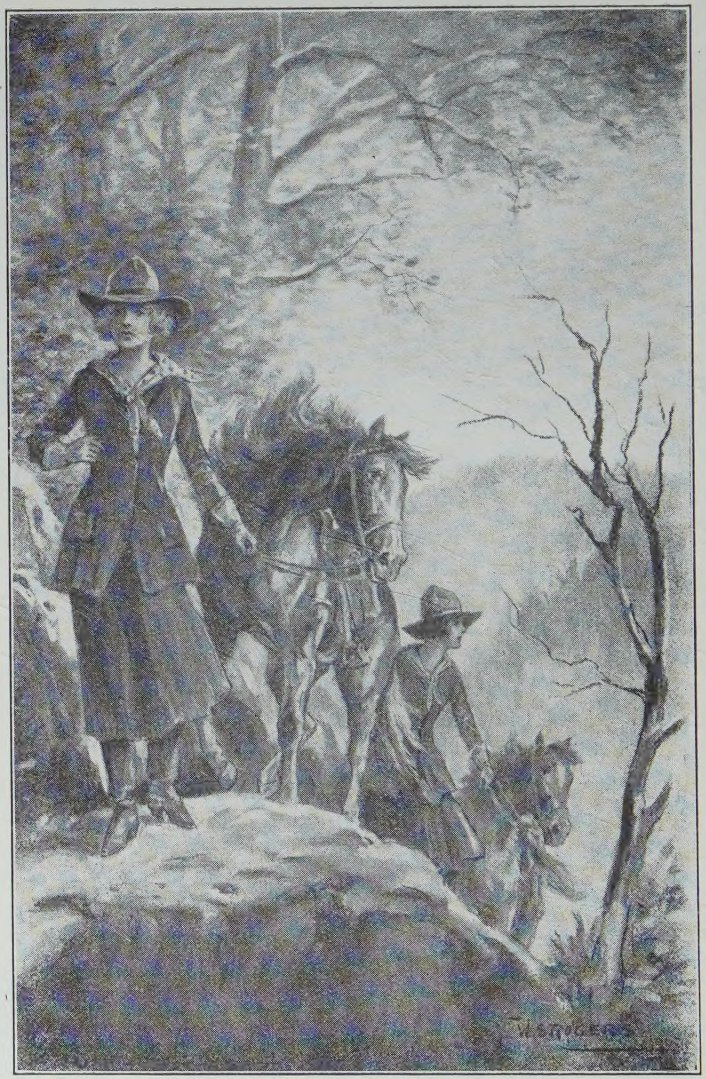
DOROTHY DALE TO THE RESCUE

MARGARET PENROSE



DOROTHY WAS AHEAD, LEADING HER HORSE UP THE NARROW TRAIL.

"Dorothy Dale to the Rescue." Page 200

DOROTHY DALE TO THE RESCUE

BY

MARGARET PENROSE

AUTHOR OF "DOROTHY DALE: A GIRL OF TO-DAY," "DOROTHY DALE AND HER CHUMS," "DOROTHY DALE'S ENGAGEMENT," "THE MOTOR GIRLS SERIES," ETC.

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THE DOROTHY DALE SERIES

DOROTHY DALE: A GIRL OF TO-DAY
DOROTHY DALE AT GLENWOOD SCHOOL
DOROTHY DALE'S GREAT SECRET
DOROTHY DALE AND HER CHUMS
DOROTHY DALE'S QUEER HOLIDAYS
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DOROTHY DALE TO THE RESCUE

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Bad News	1
II.	Joe Disappears	8
III.	Called Home	16
IV.	On the Trail	24
V.	Captured	32
VI.	More Trouble	38
VII.	A Letter from Garry	47
VIII.	The Search	55
IX.	In the Tree	62
X.	A Clue	71
XI.	Dorothy Reaches a Decision	78
XII.	A Guess	84
XIII.	Derailed	90
XIV.	The Warning	104
XV.	Disappointment	109
XVI.	Dorothy Hopes Again	116
XVII.	Some Rascals Reappear	133
XVIII.	Playing a Part	134
XIX.	An Old Friend	140
XX.	Real News at Last	146
XXI.	Two Scoundrels	154
XXII.	A Surprise	163

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXIII.	GONE AGAIN	185
XXIV.	A WASTED BULLET	194
XXV.	THE STORM	202
XXVI.	A GENTLEMAN	209
XXVII.	WHAT WAS THAT?	215
XXVIII.	A VOICE IN THE MOUNTAIN	221
XXIX.	THE DASTARDLY PLOT	229
XXX.	CAPTURED	237

DOROTHY DALE TO THE RESCUE

CHAPTER I

BAD NEWS

"EVERYTHING about the old *Bugle* office seems so changed," said Dorothy Dale slowly. "I feel sort of——"

"Homesick?" giggled her chum, Tavia Travers.

"Exactly," retorted Dorothy. "That gorgeous big printing press which has taken the place of the one we used to have——"

"The old one-lunger Ralph had charge of?" Tavia again interrupted airily. "It was funny, wasn't it?"

"I think it was a dear," declared Dorothy loyally. "It used to print the old *Bugle* in pretty good shape, anyway."

"Good gracious, Doro, any one would think you were in mourning for the old *Bugle* office," cried Tavia, exasperated. "If you want the old one-lunger back, I am sure you can get it, provided it has not gone to adorn an ash heap somewhere."

Dorothy smiled, but her eyes were wistful. The two girls had returned to Dalton and were now staying at Tavia's home. They had just visited the offices of the *Bugle,* the paper formerly owned by Major Dale and which, for a number of years, had been the chief source of income of the Dale family.

The girls were impressed by the great changes that had taken place in the newspaper office. A fine new printing press had been installed, the offices renovated and modernized until all trace of the rather dingy and shabby quarters of the old *Bugle* had been lost.

Small wonder that Dorothy Dale, for whom the paper had always held a peculiar fascination, felt taken aback by the great change that had taken place during her absence. It was like losing an old and dear though shabby friend and finding a prosperous but unfamiliar stranger in his place.

"Do you remember that first assignment of my journalistic career?" said Tavia, with a giggle. "I thought I was cut out for a star reporter that time, for sure."

"That was the obituary assignment Ralph Willoby gave you, wasn't it?" returned Dorothy, with a reminiscent chuckle. "My gracious, how many ages off that time seems, Tavia!"

"Yes, we are growing old and gray," agreed

the flyaway sadly. "I wonder you haven't taken to cap and spectacles long ere this, Doro, my dear. I am sure I can see white hairs gleaming in the sunlight."

"I hope not. I don't think Garry likes white hair," said Dorothy demurely.

"Speaking of snowy locks, hasn't Mr. Grant a stunning head of them?" said the irrepressible girl. "I simply adore that pepper and salt effect, don't you, Doro?"

"I guess so," said Dorothy absently. Her mind was still busy with the *Bugle* offices and the changes made there.

"I wish the Major had not sold the *Bugle,* Tavia," she said wistfully. "I can't forget how I used to help get out the old paper and—I would like to do it again."

"Good gracious, hear the child!" cried Tavia, making big eyes at her chum. "Not hungering for a career at this late date, are you, Doro? What do you suppose Garry would say to your making a reporteress of yourself?"

Dorothy dimpled and her eyes began to shine as they always did at mention of Garry Knapp.

"I suppose he wouldn't approve," she admitted. "He is just old-fashioned enough to think that the man ought to be the only money-maker in the family."

"Well, why not, as long as he can make

enough?" demanded Tavia airily. "That is really the important thing."

"Tavia, how you talk!" Dorothy rebuked her. "You know very well you would marry Nat White if he lost every cent he had in the world."

"Just the same, I hope he doesn't," replied Tavia, making a face at her more serious friend. "I like him very well just the way he is. But it will be nice when he gets white hair and whiskers like Mr. Grant," she added pensively.

Dorothy frowned, then laughed. There was no use taking Tavia seriously, and, besides, she very rarely meant any of the flippant things she said.

The Mr. Grant whose hair and whiskers Tavia so openly admired was the new owner of the *Bugle* and a dignified old gentleman whom Major Dale held in great esteem. To hear Tavia refer to him so flippantly rather shocked Dorothy. But then, Tavia was Tavia, and there was no use trying to change her.

"I wish the Major had not sold the *Bugle,*" Dorothy repeated, with a sigh. "It seems, somehow, like turning against an old friend."

The two girls walked on in silence through the lovely spring sunshine, each busy with her own thoughts. They were very happy thoughts, for both Dorothy and Tavia had every reason to be happy.

During the past winter the chums had become engaged to the "two dearest fellows in the world." Nat White, Dorothy's cousin and Tavia's "bright particular star," to use the latter's own phrase, was expected in Dalton that afternoon. At the thought that Nat might even reach her home before Dorothy and herself, Tavia quickened her pace, eagerly urging the thoughtful Dorothy along with her.

Garry Knapp, Dorothy's wild and woolly Westerner—again Tavia's description—had returned to his beloved West to cultivate his land and raise the "best wheat crop anywhere near Desert City." Dorothy was fully in sympathy with this ambition. The only part of it she did not like was the long miles that separated her from Garry and Garry from her. It was not so very long since she had seen him, yet it seemed to her like an interminable space of time.

"I bet I can guess what you are thinking about," said Tavia, reading Dorothy's wistful expression. "Are you on?"

"I never bet," replied Dorothy primly, and Tavia hugged her.

"You blessed Puritan! Just for that I'll tell you, anyway."

"You needn't bother," said Dorothy hastily, for she was sometimes afraid of her friend's intuitions.

"Oh, but I will! You were wishing like all possessed that you could be in my shoes for one little hour."

Dorothy flushed and took refuge in an admonishing:

"How you do put things, Octavia Travers!"

"You were thinking that if your darling Garry were coming instead of Nat, you would be fox-trotting madly along this road instead of pursuing your course with every evidence of decorum," persisted the outrageous Tavia. "Now 'fess up. Amn't I right?"

"Maybe—all except the fox-trot," agreed Dorothy, with a laugh. "I prefer the waltz myself."

"Um—dreamy stuff, lights low, soft music," drawled Tavia. "I imagine that would just suit you, Doro dear. As for myself, give me jazz every time!"

"When do you expect Nat?" asked Dorothy, jolted out of her dreamy abstraction.

"Right now, any minute. We are liable to bump into him at any corner," replied Tavia vigorously. "My goodness, Doro, my heart is palpitating frightfully. I wonder if one ever dies of such things."

"You won't, that one thing is sure," said Dorothy, looking with admiration at her chum's flushed face and dancing eyes. "Just now you

look like nothing so much as an advertisement for health food."

"How unromantic," Tavia reproached her. "And just when I was pining gracefully for poor Nat, too."

"Here he comes now!" cried Dorothy, and Tavia whirled around to see a tall figure coming swiftly toward them. Nat waved his hat boyishly and broke into a run. He reached them just as they turned the corner of the street on which Tavia lived.

"Hello there, coz!" he said, pinching Dorothy's pretty cheek, then turned to Tavia.

"Not here in the street, you silly boy," Tavia said, as the young man bent over her. "We are almost home. Can't you wait?"

"Not long!" returned Nat ardently. Then, as they slowly approached Tavia's house, he turned to Dorothy, his manner serious.

"I am afraid I have bad news for you, Dot," he said, reluctantly adding, in response to Dorothy's startled glance: "It's about Joe."

CHAPTER II

JOE DISAPPEARS

DOROTHY'S face went white and she gripped Nat fiercely by the arm.

"Tell me what it is!" she gasped. "Nat, don't try to keep anything from me!"

"I couldn't if I wanted to, Dot, old girl," said her cousin gravely. "That's why the Major wanted me to break the news to you."

"Oh, Nat," wailed Dorothy, "don't keep me waiting! Tell me what you mean! What is the matter with Joe?"

They reached Tavia's house. Nat pulled the two girls down beside him in the porch swing, an arm about Tavia and his hand gripping Dorothy's reassuringly.

"He has disappeared, Dot," said the young fellow gravely. "But you mustn't——"

"Disappeared!" cried Dorothy, interrupting him. "How could he, Nat? Where would he go?"

"Why, the whole thing is preposterous, Nat!" cried Tavia. "A boy like Joe wouldn't do such

a thing—in earnest. He must just be playing a prank."

"A rather serious prank," replied Nat soberly. "And one I wouldn't recommend any youngster to try."

Dorothy felt dazed. That Joe, her young and mischievous though dearly beloved brother, should disappear!

"Nat, did he—did he—run away, do you suppose? Was there a quarrel or anything?"

"Not a thing, as far as I can find out," returned Nat. Then he paused, but finally added slowly, as though he were reluctant to cause his cousin any further pain: "But there was a rather curious coincidence."

"Nat, you are so provoking!" cried Tavia impatiently. "Do come to the point! Can't you see Doro is ready to collapse with fright?"

"There has been a fire in Haskell's store——"

"Good gracious, listen to the boy!" cried the flyaway scathingly. "As though that could have anything to do with Joe!"

"It may have a good deal to do with Joe; or with his disappearance, at any rate," said Nat quietly. Once more Dorothy reached her hand out pleadingly toward him.

"What has this to do with Joe?" she asked faintly.

"We don't know, Dot. And, of course, it may

not have a thing to do with him. It seemed rather an odd coincidence that Joe should disappear on the very day that Haskell's toy and stationery store burned down."

"It was the largest store of its kind in North Birchlands," murmured Dorothy, hardly knowing what she said. "And you say Joe disappeared at about the same time? Oh, Joe, foolish boy, where are you now? What have you done?"

Dorothy buried her face in her hands and Tavia rose from her place beside Nat and encircled Dorothy in a strangling embrace.

"Never you mind, Doro Doodlekins," she cried stoutly. "We'll find that young brother of yours or know the reason why!"

But Dorothy was not to be so easily consoled. For years, since the death of her mother, Dorothy Dale, young as she was, had taken the place of their mother to her two younger brothers, Joe and Roger. The boys were good boys, but mischievous, and Dorothy had spent many anxious moments over them.

The adventures of Dorothy, Tavia and their friends begin with the first volume of this series, entitled "Dorothy Dale: A Girl of To-Day." At that time the Dale family lived in Dalton, a small town in New York State. Major Dale owned and edited *The Dalton Bugle* and upon the success of this journal depended the welfare of his

family. Stricken desperately ill in the midst of a campaign to "clean up" Dalton, the existence of the *Bugle* was threatened, as well as the efforts of the better element in town to establish prohibition.

Dorothy, a mere girl at that time, came gallantly to the rescue, getting out the paper when her father was unable to do so, and in other ways doing much toward saving the day.

Tavia Travers, her most intimate girl chum and as different from Dorothy as night from day, had helped and encouraged the latter in her great undertaking. Since then the two girls had been inseparable.

Later Major Dale had come into a considerable fortune so that he was no longer compelled to depend upon the *Bugle* for his livelihood. As a result, the Dale family moved to The Cedars, a handsome estate at North Birchlands, where already lived the Major's widowed sister and her two sons, Ned and Nat White, both older than Dorothy.

At Glenwood School Dorothy started on a different life. Her school adventures were many and interesting, and in these Dorothy and Tavia never failed to take a leading part.

In the volume directly preceding this, entitled "Dorothy Dale's Engagement," Dorothy met romance in the person of handsome Garry Knapp,

a young Westerner who dreamed of raising wheat on his ranch near Desert City. True love followed its proverbially rocky course with the two young people, but the death of Garry's Uncle Terry and the legacy of a considerable fortune left him by the old man magically smoothed the path for them.

Now we find Dorothy again in Dalton with Tavia, looking forward to her next meeting with Garry Knapp and, despite all her common sense and will power, missing him desperately in the meantime.

And to her here had come Nat with this terrifying news about Joe.

What was she going to do? How was she going to find her brother?

She turned to Nat again pleadingly.

"Tell me all about it, Nat; every little thing. Perhaps that will help me think what I should do."

"I've told you all I know about Joe——"

"But about the fire?" Dorothy interrupted him impatiently. "How did it start? What made it?"

"An explosition in the back room, I believe," returned Nat, his usually merry face clouded with anxiety. "Nobody seems to know what made it, but there is a general impression that there was some sort of explosion. People in the neigh-

borhood say they heard a loud noise and a few moments later saw smoke coming out of the store windows."

"About time somebody sent in an alarm, I should think," began Tavia, but Nat silenced her.

"You would think somebody sent in an alarm if you could have glimpsed the number of engines rushing to the rescue," he retorted. "I don't think there was a firehouse in North Birchlands, even the smallest and humblest that was neglected."

"Yet they failed to save the store," murmured Dorothy.

"It was a fierce fire and by the time the firemen turned a working stream on it, the whole place was gutted."

"Was anybody hurt?" inquired Tavia, and Dorothy turned startled eyes on Nat. It was the first time she had thought of that possibility.

"Mr. Haskell was pretty badly burned," replied Nat reluctantly. "The old codger would dodge back into the flames in a crazy attempt to save his account books. They were burned up, of course, and he came very near following in their footsteps."

"They haven't got any, as you know very well, Nat White," said Tavia flippantly, but in-

stantly her face sobered as she looked at Dorothy. Her chum was white and there was a strained expression about her mouth that made her suddenly look years older.

"You shouldn't have told her that about Mr. Haskell," Tavia reproached Nat. "It wasn't necessary to go into all the gruesome details."

"She asked me," Nat defended himself, adding in a more cheerful tone: "Anyway, there isn't anything gruesome about it. Nobody was seriously hurt, not even Mr. Haskell. They took him to the hospital to dress his burns, and the old fellow will probably be up and around as chipper as ever in a few days."

But Dorothy shook her head.

"If they took him to the hospital he must be pretty seriously hurt," she said, and Tavia gave an impatient flounce in the swing.

"Good gracious, Doro Doodlekins, there's no use looking on the worst side of the thing!" she cried. "Let's presume that Mr. Haskell is all right and that Joe will turn up, right side up with care, in a few days."

But Dorothy was not listening to her. She turned her white face to Nat who was watching her anxiously.

"Nat," she said slowly, "you don't suppose Joe's disappearance really has anything to do with the fire, do you? I mean," she said quickly as

she saw the frown of quick denial on Nat's brow, "you don't think that—by accident—he might have—you know he always is getting into all sorts of scrapes."

"It is merely a coincidence, Dot," repeated Nat, hoping that the words sounded more reassuring to his cousin than they did to him. He knew that they had not when Dorothy caught up his words, turning toward him with an angry light in her eyes.

"Then it is a very unfortunate coincidence," she cried. "You know as well as I do, Nat, that when a thing like this happens and then some one runs away, his name is always connected——"

"Hush, Doro!" cautioned Tavia, for Dorothy had unconsciously raised her voice. "A stranger approaches on foot. Methinks he is a messenger lad."

The "messenger lad" handed Dorothy a yellow envelope for which she signed tremulously.

"A telegram!" she whispered, looking from Tavia to Nat. "I—oh, Tavia, I am almost afraid to open it!"

CHAPTER III

CALLED HOME

"LET me do it, Doro," cried Tavia. "It won't do any good for you to sit there trembling like a leaf!"

She held out her hand for the telegram, but for answer Dorothy quickly tore open the envelope.

"It is from Ned," she cried, as Tavia looked over her shoulder. "He says Joe has not been found and there has been no word from him. Oh, I can't bear it any longer," she cried desperately. "What *shall* I do?"

Tavia put an arm about her chum again, but, as though the contact had galvanized her to action, Dorothy rose swiftly to her feet.

"I must go home at once," she cried, turning toward the front door. "I will go in and pack my bag if you will 'phone for a taxi, Nat."

Tavia caught hold of her skirt, holding her back.

"But what good will it do you to go to North Birchlands, Doro?" pleaded the latter, unwilling to have Dorothy's visit so rudely interrupted.

"You can keep in constant touch with North Birchlands by telephone and telegraph."

"But—don't you see—I must be there, right on the spot!" cried Dorothy, shaking off Tavia's detaining hand. "Please don't stop me, Tavia. I hate to go, but it isn't my fault. Will you tell that taxi man to hurry, Nat?"

Nat promised, and in a few minutes Dorothy, hatted and cloaked and bag in hand, returned to the porch, ready to go. What was her surprise then, to find Tavia there before her. And Tavia also carried a bag!

"Wh-where are you going?" stammered Dorothy, and Tavia chuckled.

"With you, you ridiculous Doro," she said. "Do you suppose for a moment I would let you go without me?"

"But your mother——"

"Oh, Ma will let me do anything I want to," retorted Tavia, with a careless shrug of her shoulders. "She is lying down, so I didn't even ask her. Just left a note pinned to the pincushion. When she sees that she will think for sure I have eloped."

Dorothy hesitated, a tiny frown on her forehead. She could never become quite accustomed to the queerness of the Travers household. Everything in her own home had always been so orderly and comfortable and normal.

But with Tavia it was different, had always been different, and probably always would be different. For Tavia's mother was extravagant, lazy, and often actually untidy. Tavia, left to the guidance of her mother, might have had a hard time of it.

But Mr. Travers was different, and though he had never made a great success of himself financially, he was genial, good-tempered and lovable. In fact, Dorothy had often, without wishing to be unfair in the least, attributed Tavia's good traits to her father.

But now this action of Tavia's leaving home at a moment's notice to return for an indefinite stay at North Birchlands with only a scrawled note pinned hastily to a pincushion to announce her intention, seemed all wrong.

"But I want to say good-bye to your mother and tell her how sorry I am that I have to cut my visit short," she protested.

Tavia shot her a laughing glance that was still shrewd and far-seeing.

"She wouldn't thank you for it, Doro, my dear," she said, with a hint of sadness underlying the light words. "Ma never allows any one to interrupt her afternoon siesta. Anyway," she added, dismissing the subject as a taxicab rolled up to the door, "I left word about you in the note—said you left regrets and all that

sort of thing. Come on, Doro, make it snappy."

Dorothy sighed as she handed her grip to Nat and slowly followed the flyaway Tavia to the cab. There were times when she wished Tavia would not use so much slang and always be in such a tremendous hurry. It wore on one's nerves occasionally.

Once in the cab Dorothy sank back in a corner while Nat and Tavia conversed in low tones. She was thinking of Joe and what must be her first action upon reaching The Cedars.

She would go down town, of course, to inspect Haskell's store, or what remained of it. She would talk to people in the neighborhood and find out if any one had seen Joe in that vicinity at the time of the fire.

But surely no one could have seen him! Joe could have had nothing to do with that catastrophe! Dorothy thrust the horrid thought from her mind, only to have it return again with the question: Then how explain Joe's mysterious disappearance, and just at that time, too?

Perhaps the boy had been hurt. Perhaps they had taken him to a hospital where they had been unable to identify him.

She spoke this thought aloud, and Nat immediately put her fears to rest, on that score at least.

"The first thing the Major did was to 'phone

the North Birchlands Hospital and two or three others in the vicinity," he said. "They had brought in no one remotely answering Joe's description."

"Then where is he?" cried Dorothy desperately.

It was just as well that they reached the station at that moment and that they were forced to run for the train. The hustle and excitement served temporarily to divert Dorothy's mind from her trouble.

Tavia kept up a lively chatter for the major part of the train trip to North Birchlands so that Dorothy had little time to indulge her unhappy thoughts.

It was only when they entered the living room of The Cedars and faced the Major and Mrs. White that Dorothy felt the full gravity of the situation.

She kissed her Aunt Winnie on the cheek and then went over to her father, kneeled down beside him and took his hand between her own.

Tavia's eyes softened as she took in the tableau, and with a significant gesture she turned to Nat. The two left the room and Mrs. White softly followed them. Father and daughter were left alone.

"You haven't heard anything, Daddy?" asked Dorothy, anxious eyes upon her father's face.

It seemed to her that the Major looked strangely old and haggard.

Major Dale shook his head. He had brightened at sight of his daughter, but at the mention of Joe his face clouded heavily again.

"I don't understand it, Dot," he replied. "Joe was always such a straightforward, dependable lad, despite the little pranks he was always playing. Wouldn't be a boy if he didn't have some mischief in him. But a good boy at that—a good boy——" His voice trailed off and his eyes sought the window restlessly.

Dorothy became truly alarmed. Her father was ill, she could see that—although the Major would be the last man to admit such a thing. His health had not been robust for some time and now the shock of this thing had been too much for him.

With an effort Dorothy pulled herself together and spoke encouragingly.

"Of course he's a good boy, the best in the world," she said. "Wherever he has gone, we can be sure it isn't very far. "We will have him back in a day or two. You just watch and see!"

The Major smiled and rested his hand for a moment on Dorothy's bright hair.

"I hope so, Dorothy," he said, adding with an unconscious wistfulness that touched Dorothy deeply: "Everything seems more hopeful now

that we have you back, my dear. I can't seem to do without my little daughter any more."

"You won't have to do without me ever, Daddy dear," said Dorothy, and there were tears in her eyes and in her voice. Then, fearing that she had betrayed her anxiety over his changed appearance, she went on in her ordinary tone: "Don't you think you could snatch a little rest, dear? I imagine you haven't been sleeping very well lately."

Major Dale stirred impatiently and again his restless glance sought the window.

"I don't want to sleep," he said on a querulous note that Dorothy had never heard before. "I won't close my eyes again until we have found that boy."

With a heavy heart Dorothy left the room and went in search of Roger, the youngest of the family and Joe's shadow. The two boys were almost always together, for Roger worshiped his older brother and followed unquestioningly wherever he led.

Roger was in Joe's abandoned room staring moodily out the window, and when he saw Dorothy he flung his arms about her neck and wept wildly despite a manful effort to control his grief.

Dorothy patted his small shoulder and waited until he shamefacedly wiped away the tears with a grubby hand, leaving a track of dirt from the

corner of one blue eye to the opposite corner of his still-tremulous mouth.

Then she drew the lad down on Joe's bed and gently questioned him.

"Joe wouldn't let me go downtown with him that last day," said the little lad, his lip trembling as if with an old grievance. "He said he was going to meet Jack Popella——"

"Jack Popella! That boy!" cried Dorothy, springing to her feet. "Oh, Roger, are you sure?"

CHAPTER IV

ON THE TRAIL

ROGER looked chagrined and more than a little frightened. The fright was caused by his sister's vehemence, the chagrin because he had unwittingly "told on" Joe. In the code of Roger no crime was as bad as that of "telling tales" on one's mates. He had spoken before he thought. It is so hard for a small boy not to speak before he thinks!

But Dorothy was on her feet now, her cheeks blazing, and he knew he would have to tell her the truth, not keeping back any of the story. Roger gave a resigned sigh and braced himself to answer questions. But Dorothy asked only one of him. That was a reiterated and breathless:

"Roger, are you sure?"

Roger nodded miserably, and to his surprise Dorothy turned suddenly and left the room. Roger stared after her wide-eyed. He was still miserable, but he was intensely curious as well.

"I wouldn't be in Joe's shoes, not for anything!" he assured himself, as he returned to the

window. "And I suppose he'll just about murder me when he finds out I went and told on him. It was his fault, anyway," he added, in an effort at self-justification. "I told him he oughtn't to go with that fresh Popella kid, and so did Dorothy. My, but I—I wish Joe would come back!"

Meantime Dorothy rushed upstairs. Meeting Tavia outside the door of her room, she brushed past her almost rudely. If it had not been so late she would have gone downtown immediately.

The fact that Joe had been with Jack Popella on the day of the fire augmented her fears immeasurably. Popella was a young Italian lad with a not very savory reputation, and Dorothy had been alarmed when, on several occasions, she had seen Joe with him.

She had tried reasoning with the boy, had pointed out the fact that one is very often judged by the company one keeps, but Joe had refused to take her admonitions seriously.

"You talk as if I never went with anybody else, Dot," he had said on one of these occasions. "And I never have anything to do with him except just when I happen to meet him. I can't help saying hello when he talks to me."

This argument had silenced Dorothy, and it had also almost convinced her that she had nothing to fear in that direction. Almost, but not

quite, for Joe still was seen quite often in the company of Jack Popella.

To see this lad and question him was Dorothy's one, all-absorbing desire just now. But to do this she must wait till the next day, and the hours stretched interminably between.

She flung herself into a chair, her chin cupped in her hand, staring moodily at the floor. Tavia came in and perched on the edge of the bed and regarded her chum curiously.

"Yes, I am human," she said at last, in a mechanical tone. "I speak, I walk. If you were to pinch me I might shriek."

Dorothy looked up with a frown. It was the first time she had noticed her chum's presence in the room.

"What *are* you raving about?" she asked.

"I was merely trying to call your attention to the fact that I am human," said Tavia patiently. "By the way you brushed past me in the hall, I assumed that you thought I was a chair, a bedstead, or even a humble hatrack."

"Never a hatrack, Tavia dear," replied Dorothy, smiling despite herself. "You are far too plump and pretty."

"I admit the latter but deny the former allegation," said Tavia calmly. "Why do you think I follow the dictates of Lovely Lucy Larriper so

faithfully if not for the purpose of keeping my figure intact?"

Dorothy did not answer. She had lapsed into her former mood and Tavia regarded her chum thoughtfully. Then she deserted the foot of the bed for the arm of Dorothy's chair.

"Come on, Doro, snap out of it!" she urged. "Nothing ever has been gained by surrendering to the doleful dumps. Suppose Napoleon had been discouraged!"

"Perhaps he was—at Waterloo," returned Dorothy. But she added quickly in response to Tavia's impatient gesture: "Now don't you go lecturing me, Tavia Travers. I will have the doleful dumps or any other kind if I feel like it."

Tavia felt that her chum was keeping something to herself, but though she questioned her discreetly—and otherwise—she could gain no information from her other than the fact that she expected to go downtown early the following morning.

"Well, buck up, anyway, Doro, and get ready for dinner," Tavia said finally, as Nat's voice was heard below calling to the two girls to "join the family in the dining room." "It won't help Joe any for you to starve yourself to death."

"Listen!" cried Dorothy, suddenly jumping to

her feet. "Isn't that Ned talking to Nat? Maybe he has news of Joe."

Dorothy was out of the room and rushing down the stairs before Tavia had time to more than blink her eyes. She followed her chum in time to see the latter pounce upon Ned with desperate eagerness.

"It isn't any use, Dot, I'm afraid," she heard Ned say reluctantly. "I have followed up every possible clue—there were not very many, at that —and none of them seems to lead to Joe. He has disappeared as completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed him up."

They went in to dinner after that, but they made very poor business of eating; all except Tavia, that is, who never allowed anything to interfere with her appetite.

Once, looking across at the Major, she did stop long enough to say in an undertone to Nat:

"Major Dale looks dreadfully, doesn't he, Nat—like a ghost at a feast?"

"If you call this a feast," Nat grumbled. "Seems more like a funeral to me."

After dinner Dorothy sought out her Aunt Winnie and, drawing her into a corner, spoke to her about her father. Mrs. White patted the girl's hand gently and sought to evade Dorothy's questions.

"Your father's general health seems unim-

paired my dear," she said. "But of course he is frightfully worried about Joe."

"It is more than worry that makes him act as he did at dinner," persisted Dorothy. "He hardly touched a thing. Aunt Winnie, he is on the verge of a breakdown, and you know it as well as I!"

"Perhaps I do, my dear," sighed Mrs. White. "But I don't see what we can do about it."

"Except find Joe," replied Dorothy softly. "We *must* find Joe!"

Early the next morning Dorothy dressed herself in her street things and slipped out of the house without awakening Tavia. What she had to do she wanted to do alone, and she feared her chum's persistent curiosity. No one should know that Joe had been with Jack Popella on the day Haskell's store burned down and the day when Joe himself had disappeared if it was possible for her to keep the knowledge to herself!

She did not even stop to have breakfast at home, for fear her Aunt Winnie would question her concerning her errand downtown.

Feeling absurdly guilty, she slipped into a small restaurant in the downtown district in the vicinity of Haskell's store. She questioned the yawning waitress as adroitly as she could about the fire, but the woman could give her no particulars

Mechanically Dorothy gulped down the over-

fried egg and underdone bacon, thinking longingly of home as she did so. How different the morning meal would be at The Cedars.

She had started on the second piece of bacon when the door opened and—in walked Tavia Travers!

Dorothy gasped and nearly upset the cup of coffee at her elbow. She stared at though she were seeing a ghost.

Tavia came straight up to her table, color bright and eyes dancing.

"So you hoped to escape me, fair one?" she said, sinking into a chair and motioning to the waitress. "You should have known better by this time, Doro, my dear. Were you not aware that I always sleep with one eye open?"

"You must have had them both open wide if you saw me leave The Cedars this morning," replied Dorothy crossly. "I didn't want to have even you with me this morning, Tavia."

"Business of my becoming horribly offended and leaving the place in a huff," drawled Tavia, as she ordered a ham omelet from the indifferent waitress. "But I am going to disappoint you, Doro darling, for the reason that you will be very glad of my company before you get through. I intend to befriend you at all costs, even at the expense of my honest pride."

"Oh, Tavia, you are too ridiculous!" sighed

Dorothy. "I can't be angry with you, no matter how hard I try. Only, if you are coming with me you will have to hurry with your breakfast."

"Have a heart, Doro. The ravening wolves have nothing on me!"

But under Dorothy's insistence Tavia finished her breakfast in a very short time, and after Dorothy had paid the check the two girls left the place and turned in the direction of Haskell's store.

Half way down the block it loomed before them, a charred and gutted ruin. Dorothy uttered an exclamation and grasped Tavia's arm.

From the wrecked store a skulking figure emerged, turned, and, at sight of Dorothy and Tavia, darted down the street.

"Jack Popella!" gasped Dorothy. "What is he doing here?"

CHAPTER V

CAPTURED

"GRACIOUS goodness, what ails the child!"

The exclamation was Tavia's, for at sight of the young Italian Dorothy had left her side with startling abruptness. Now as Tavia gaped, open-mouthed, she saw Dorothy overtake the boy and put out a hand as though to stop him.

What was her surprise to see Jack Popella make another of his quick dodges, evading Dorothy's outstretched hand and dart across the street.

There were two automobiles approaching from opposite directions, but this fact served to stop neither Popella nor his pursuer. Tavia screamed, for it looked as though both the reckless ones would be instantly killed.

"Dorothy, stop! Come back! Have you lost your mind?" she shrieked, and herself started in pursuit.

The boy had dodged in front of the first automobile with Dorothy close at his heels. It seemed to the excited Tavia as though the car missed her chum by a fraction of an inch and she was equally

certain that the second car would not miss her at all!

"Dorothy!" she shrieked again, and without thinking of her own danger dashed out into the street.

She fully expected to see Dorothy stretched beneath the wheels of the second car. Instead she beheld the amazing sight of her chum standing in the middle of the road breathing heavily, but triumphant, her hand gripping the collar of the squirming Popella lad.

Tavia was not sure whether she wanted to laugh at the spectacle or burst into tears of relief and reaction. She did neither. Instead, she took Dorothy by the arm and led her, still clutching Popella, back to the safety of the sidewalk.

"Now maybe you will explain yourself, Dorothy Dale," she gasped. "Do you know you very nearly gave me heart failure, flinging yourself at those automobiles? Tried your best to get killed, didn't you?"

"Hush, Tavia! Let's move on," said Dorothy, looking uneasily about her. "We don't want to attract attention." And she started down the street, dragging with her her unwilling prisoner.

"Does this go with us?" asked Tavia in a stage whisper, indicating the young Italian. "If you are so anxious not to attract attention, Doro

darling, I might suggest that you set your prisoner free."

"Not until he answers a few questions!" returned Dorothy. Her eyes were hard and bright and her grip tightened on the young Italian's collar as he tried once more to wriggle free.

"Well, I suppose you know your own business best," sighed Tavia. "But I do wish you wouldn't be so mysterious about it."

They had reached a side street and Dorothy paused and addressed her scowling captive.

"If you promise not to run away before I have a chance to talk with you, Jack, I'll let you go," she said.

Popella muttered something she took for assent, and Dorothy released her hold upon his collar. The youngster hitched his coat up and stood sullenly with his eyes upon the ground.

"A pleasant specimen of the male species," Tavia whispered, but her chum frowned and motioned her to be quiet.

"Why did you run away when you saw us coming this morning?" asked Dorothy quietly. "Why should you think we would want to hurt you?"

Jack Popella glanced up quickly, then down at the ground again. Evidently he was surprised at her gentle tone and somewhat disarmed by it.

"I wasn't scared. I just didn't want to talk to no one."

"Why?" Dorothy continued her inquisition, and the boy shuffled uneasily.

"Aw, how does a guy know that?" he protested. "I just didn't, that's all."

"Now listen, Jack!" Dorothy's voice altered suddenly, became crisp and determined. "I have a few questions I want to ask you and I want you to answer them truthfully. If you don't, I may be able to get you into a great deal of trouble."

This kind of talk was more what Jack Popella was used to, and he looked at Dorothy again, a sullen, unpleasant light smoldering in his eyes. Dorothy shuddered to think that her brother Joe had ever come in contact with a lad like this.

"You ain't got nothin' on me," growled the Popella lad. "Go ahead and ask your questions. I ain't afraid of you."

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, my lad," commanded Tavia sharply. "Or you may find you have a good deal to be afraid of."

Dorothy made another slight gesture as though pleading for silence.

"You surely haven't anything to be afraid of if you tell me what I want to know," she said patiently, for she had come to the conclusion that the best way to handle the sullen lad was by kindness, not threats. "Jack, my brother Joe

has disappeared and we have no idea where to look for him. Can't you help us?"

Tavia started and looked sharply at Dorothy. So that was what her chum had been keeping from her the night before! She had suspected Popella and had not wanted her, Tavia, to know that Popella was intimate enough with Joe to come under suspicion. Poor Doro, she certainly had her hands full of trouble!

As for the young Italian, at the mention of Joe's name his behavior became very strange indeed. He squirmed and once more glanced up and down the block as though contemplating escape.

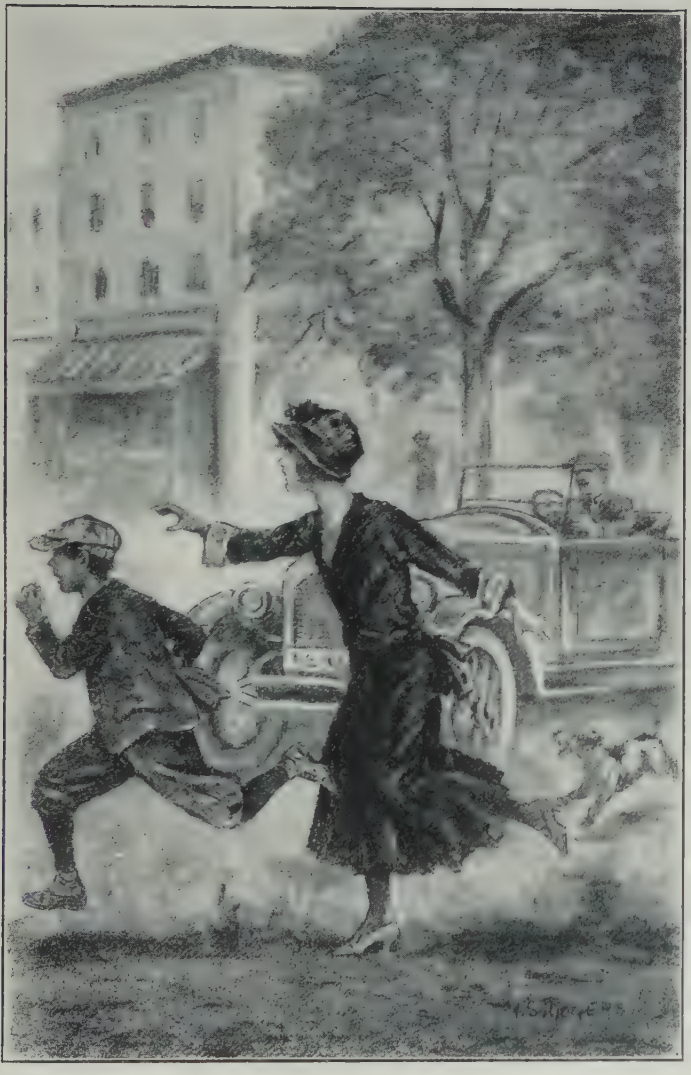
Dorothy took a step or two closer and he evidently changed his mind. He shuffled to the other foot and said, without raising his eyes:

"I don't know nothin' about Joe, honest I don't, Miss Dale. If he's disappeared I'm sure sorry, but I don't know nothin' about him."

For a moment Dorothy was nonplused. The Italian's protestations seemed sincere enough, and yet——

"Don't believe him," whispered Tavia in her ear. "He has a shuffling foot and a shifty eye. A wicked combination—take it from one who knows!"

Dorothy had an absurd desire to giggle, but Tavia's words had been enough to turn uncer-



THE BOY DODGED IN FRONT OF THE AUTOMOBILE WITH DOROTHY AT HIS HEELS.

tainty into active distrust. Still she held herself in check, not speaking with the severity she thought the unpleasant lad deserved.

"I have reason to know you were with Joe on the morning that Haskell's store burned down," she said, and Tavia gave a surprised exclamation which, while instantly stifled, caused the swift rush of color to Dorothy's face.

"Aw, who tol' you that? It ain't so!" muttered Popella.

With these words something seemed to snap in Dorothy's brain. Her horrible anxiety of the past few hours fanned the indignation she felt against this lad. She reached out and gripped him fiercely by the shoulders.

"It is so, and you know it," she said in a tone that terrified the cowardly boy. "And if you don't tell me the truth now, Jack Popella, I will turn you over to some one who will make you. Maybe they will be able to find out then, who really set Jud Haskell's store on fire!"

It was a chance shot, but it went home. Popella writhed and wriggled in Dorothy's grip, sputtering and protesting.

"I didn't set his store on fire, I tell you!" he cried. "It was Joe that did it!"

CHAPTER VI

MORE TROUBLE

DOROTHY started back as though Jack Popella had struck her.

It was not true! It could not be true! Joe never, never would do such a thing! Her face turned very white and she trembled violently. Even Jack Popella seemed alarmed at what he had done and stood regarding her with a strange mixture of bravado and sheepishness.

Tavia, sprang forward, putting her arm about Dorothy and fixing blazing eyes upon the young Italian.

"How dare you say such a thing!" she gasped. "You know it is a horrible, an awful——"

But Dorothy rallied and pressed a hand close upon Tavia's lips.

"Don't, dear," she pleaded faintly. "I am not quite through with him yet. Jack Popella," she turned to the swarthy lad and her tone was strangely quiet and subdued, "tell me all you know. Won't you, please?"

"I don't know nothin' much," protested the Italian, abashed and sullen again. "I know that

Joe set fire to the store and when the explosion came he got scared and run away. That's all."

"Enough to scare anbody, I should say," murmured Tavia, but Dorothy took no notice of her.

"Why should Joe do a thing like that?" asked Dorothy, still in that strangely gentle tone. "He never was a bad boy, Jack. He must have had some reason."

Popella was silent, but again his glance darted up and down the block as though seeking escape.

"Won't you tell me what reason Joe had for doing such a thing—if he did it?" Dorothy persisted, repeating: "He must have had some reason."

"Aw, I dunno," returned the lad uneasily. "He had a fight with ole man Haskell, that's all."

"What about?" asked Dorothy patiently. "You must know what it was about, Jack."

"The ole man short-changed him, if you want to know," the lad burst out as though her persistence irritated him past bearing. "We was buyin' some toys with a two-dollar bill Joe had an' the ole man wouldn't give him the right change. Joe tole him about it an' the ole man got mad. Then Jot got mad an' they had a reg'lar fight."

"Must have been an unequal struggle," mur-

mured Tavia. "I imagine Joe got the worst of it."

"Aw, it wasn't that kind of a scrap," retorted the Italian lad, favoring Tavia with a pitying glance that caused her to choke and search frantically for her handkerchief. "Joe knows better than to pitch into a big feller like ole man Haskell. They just yelled at each other, that's all."

"And Joe set fire to a store because of a little thing like that!" said Dorothy, in a dazed tone, as though she were repeating something she had heard in a dream. "I don't believe it!"

"Believe it or not, lady," retorted Jack Popella, with a return of his insolent air now that suspicion had been shifted from him. "It's the trut'. So long!" And with another of his eel-like movements he dodged past Dorothy and disappeared around the corner.

Dorothy watched him go apathetically. What did it matter to her what happened to Jack Popella now?

"The slimy little toad!" cried Tavia, disgustedly. "Ugh! I should thing you would want to wash your hands, Doro. They must feel greasy."

"They don't feel at all," admitted Dorothy wearily. "Just now I don't believe there is a bit of sensation in any part of me, Tavia."

"Poor little Doro!" said Tavia gently. "Hav-

ing a pretty hard time of it, aren't you, honey? But of course you don't believe a word that little toad told you?"

Dorothy was silent and Tavia looked at her sharply.

"You don't, do you?" she repeated, with increased emphasis.

"Oh, I am trying hard not to, Tavia," cried Dorothy desperately. "But there—there is the circumstantial evidence."

"Circumstantial evidence—pah!" cried Tavia vehemently. "Any real criminal lawyer will tell you it isn't worth powder to blow it up with. Proof, that's the thing! And what proof have you? Not a bit. Only the word of that slimy little toad—who, by the way, will bear considerable watching, if you will listen to me," she added significantly.

"But Jack Popella didn't run away and Joe did!" Dorothy pointed out to her miserably.

"Oh-ho, so that's what's worrying you! Well, I wouldn't let it, if I were you. Don't you know that the smartest criminals believe that the safest place in the world for them is right in the vicinity of their crime?"

"Good gracious, Tavia, I wish you wouldn't speak of criminals so much," interrupted Dorothy unhappily. "It makes me feel uncomfortable."

Tavia wanted to laugh but, after a glance at

Dorothy's face, forbore. There were times when the careless Tavia could be very tactful, especially with the people she loved.

They returned to The Cedars to find Mrs. White considerably worried over their unexplained absence. But when Dorothy explained where she had been and what she had found out Mrs. White readily forgave her. She was as alarmed and distressed as Dorothy over the revelations of young Jack Popella and she agreed with rather significant readiness that at present nothing should be said to the Major concerning this new turn in events.

"Where is Dad?" asked Dorothy, as she turned to go unstairs. Mrs. White looked still further distressed.

"You must not be alarmed, Dorothy dear," she said. "But your father preferred to stay in bed this morning——"

"In bed!" Dorothy interrupted swiftly. "Then he is ill!"

"He says he is just tired, dear. And, indeed, he has not slept for several nights," the Major's sister explained, adding, as Dorothy once more turned to leave the room: "He has been asking for you."

"Asking for you, asking for you," hammered in Dorothy's head as she ran up the stairs to

see for herself why it was the Major had "preferred to stay in bed."

At the top of the stairs she ran into Ned, who caught her arm and held on to it, laughingly.

"Whither away so fast, fair cousin?" he queried. "You should never rush like that so soon after breakfast. Any doctor's book will tell you as much."

"Let me go, Ned," Dorothy pleaded. "Dad is ill."

"Not ill—just tired," corrected Ned, the while Dorothy wondered at his denseness. "No wonder," he added grumblingly. "I would be tired too, in his place. That young brother of yours needs a sound thrashing, Dot."

"Ned, how dare you say such a thing!" Dorothy turned upon him with flashing eyes. "Poor Joe needs his family just now—and that's all he needs."

She was gone before her cousin could speak, and Ned was left to whistle his surprise and admiration.

"Poor, loyal kid," he muttered, as he went on down the stairs. "Has a lot on her mind, too. Guess Nat and I had better get busy if we don't want to lose our reputations as rivals of the great detectives."

Meantime Dorothy had rapped upon her

father's door and, receiving no answer, pushed it gently open.

So still and quiet was the Major's face upon the pillow that she thought for a moment he was asleep. But as she turned to creep silently away he opened his eyes and called to her.

"I have been waiting to see you, daughter," he said, and again Dorothy detected that unusual wistfulness in his tone. "Where have you been?"

Dorothy evaded the question, feeling miserable as she did so. Never before had she refused to answer any query put to her by the Major and now it was almost impossible not to give him a straightforward reply. Yet how could she tell him, in his weakened condition, that Joe was suspected of having set fire to Haskell's store?

Instead, she gave some explanation of her absence that seemed to satisfy him well enough. When she came and knelt beside his bed he spoke in his old cheerful vein of his indisposition, insisting that it was sheer laziness on his part and that he would surely be downstairs for luncheon.

But Dorothy, looking at his worn and weary face, was not so optimistic. Although she succeeded in hiding her anxiety beneath her usual practical and cheerful manner, she was inwardly deciding to call up the family physician as soon as she left her father's room.

She knew that when the Major kept his bed there was something seriously wrong with him.

A few moments later, carefully muffling her voice so that her father might not hear her, Dorothy called up the doctor and was told that the physician would call at The Cedars as soon as possible, probably about eleven o'clock.

She went down to the living room and found Tavia and Nat quite evidently absorbed in each other's company. She was about to retreat and leave them to themselves when Tavia spied her and called out merrily.

"No reserved seats in here," she told Dorothy gravely, as the latter slowly returned and sank down into one of the big, comfortable chairs. "Everbody invited, free of charge. Why the long face, Doro darling? Any new and dreadful thing happened?"

"I have called Doctor Paugh to see Dad," returned Dorothy wearily. "He will be here soon, I think."

"Why, Doro, is it as bad as that?" asked Tavia, with quick sympathy. "I had no idea he was really ill."

"Have you ever known the Major to stay in bed when he didn't have to?" retorted Dorothy, and something in her tone and manner convinced both Tavia and Nat that there was more to the Major's indisposition than they had imagined.

They were silent for a few moments, then Nat spoke softly to Dorothy.

"Tavia has just been telling me what you found out from Jack Popella."

Dorothy glanced up and Nat added quickly:

"You can't put too much stock in what that fellow tells you, Dot. His word would be the last I'd trust."

"I don't know what to trust," confessed Dorothy miserably. "Or which way to turn——"

"Which reminds me," interrupted Tavia with apparent irrelevance, "that a letter came for you from the wild and woolly West a few moments ago, Doro. I have a sneaking notion it's from Garry."

CHAPTER VII

A LETTER FROM GARRY

"Good gracious, why didn't you tell me that hours ago?" cried Dorothy, rising with an alacrity that made Tavia and Nat exchange amused and sympathetic glances. "I haven't had a letter from Garry since——"

"Yesterday!" finished Tavia with fine irony, and the corners of Dorothy's mouth dimpled in a brief smile.

"The day before!" she corrected demurely. "I was beginning to worry."

She fetched the letter, a bulky, satisfactory-looking epistle from the table in the hall and returned to the living room to read it in comfort.

"I needn't ask you to excuse me while I examine my mail," she remarked to the absorbed couple in the window seat. "You are only too glad!"

"My, isn't she the mean thing!" cried Tavia, not in the least abashed. "Just wait till Garry Knapp comes East again, Doro. Make believe I won't get even!"

"When Garry comes East again you won't have any chance to get even with Dot, my dear Tavia," laughed Nat. "She won't even know that you and I exist."

"She doesn't know it now," retorted Tavia, with a meaning glance at her chum who was completely absorbed in Garry's letter.

"Well, can you blame her?" Nat's voice had softened until it reached only Tavia's ears. "She's got what we have and—it's a pretty good thing to have, isn't it, girl?"

"Nat, I never knew I was living before," confessed Tavia softly, and after that it was very lucky for them that Dorothy was too absorbed in her letter to notice them!

Garry was well. So much Dorothy learned from the letter, written in his usually cheery vein. But, though he actually said little about it in words, Dorothy could read between the lines well enough to see that something was worrying him. He spoke lightly in one place of the "gang" that was trying to "get fresh" with him and "put a spoke in his wheel."

Although he spoke lightly of the whole affair, Dorothy sensed the fact that he was worried and was correspondingly anxious. If she could only see Garry for a few moments she would worm the whole thing out of him—for she knew how

If she could only see him for a few moments! The thought and wish formed itself in her mind and became a longing so acute that it was almost pain.

To see Garry, just for a little while. To lean upon his strength, to ask his advice and follow it. She knew she could do that without question. Garry's advice was always sound.

To have him with her! And she could effect this desired result by a mere gesture! There was something thrilling in that thought. A telegram to far-off Desert City and Garry would be at her side as soon as trains could get him there.

It was a tempting vision but, as she knew, a selfish one.

Garry was having his hands full attending to his own affairs. Why should she trouble him with her worries?

And, besides, this mysterious "gang" of which he spoke so lightly would undoubtedly take advantage of his absence from the ranch to "get fresh" in earnest.

No, she must not ask his aid—not just now.

At the thought she sighed and it was such a deep and hearty sigh that the irrepressible Tavia giggled.

Dorothy started and half rose from her chair in dismay, so completely had she forgotten the

presence of Tavia and Nat in the room. Meeting the laughing gaze of the two in the window seat she relaxed again, smiling a bit sheepishly, and gathered up the various pages of her letter.

"Was it so dreadfully sad, Doro?" teased Tavia. "Dare you to read me the last page?"

"That isn't a fair dare and not a bit sporting of you, Tavia Travers," retorted Dorothy, with mock primness. "Dare me something within the bounds of possibility and I may take you up!"

"Is he coming on soon?" Tavia persisted, and Dorothy slowly shook her head.

"He is very busy on the ranch," she said, adding with an unsteady little laugh: "I guess any one who wants to see Garry in the near future will have to go out West."

How little did she know that these words, spoken carelessly enough, were to prove prophetic!

The doctor came as he had promised at eleven o'clock and, after a thorough examination of the Major, talked gravely and seriously to Mrs. White and Dorothy.

"His heart is not in as good condition as I should like to see it," he told them. "He has not been in vigorous health for some time, as you know. And now the best medicine I can recommend—besides a tonic, for which I will leave

you a prescription—is absolute rest and quiet and a mind free from worry."

He noticed the quick look that passed between Dorothy and Mrs. White at these last words and his eyes seemed to be boring into the former as he asked quietly: "Has Major Dale been subjected to a severe shock during the last two or three days?"

As simply as possible Dorothy told him the facts about Joe. The physician listened with every evidence of sympathy and concern.

"Too bad, too bad!" he murmured at last. "There is no way, I suppose, that word of his father's condition might be sent to the lad?"

"No, doctor," answered Dorothy despairingly. "We have not the slightest idea where Joe is!"

The physician nodded soberly and rose to go, leaving behind him a final admonition that, as far as it was possible, the Major's mind was to be kept free of worry.

"And he might just as well ask us," remarked Dorothy, as from an upstairs window they watched the doctor drive away, "to give him the moon!"

Mrs. White came and put her arms about Dorothy, and the girl put her head down on her aunt's shoulder and wept a little.

"It all seems so strange and upside down and

tragic, Aunt Winnie," she said, after a minute, wiping her eyes on a small square of handkerchief. "Always before when anything dreadful like this happened, I have had some idea what I ought to do, but now I am all at sea. Don't you think," she added, holding her aunt off from her and looking at her seriously, "that we ought to notify the police, set a detective on his trail, or something?"

Mrs. White looked thoughtful for a moment, but she finally shook her head.

"That would be publishing to the world Joe's connection—if there is one—with the Haskell store fire," she said. "And, for Joe's sake, that is the last thing any of us wants to happen."

"But meantime something dreadful may happen to the boy—he is only a boy, after all, Aunt Winnie," wailed Dorothy. "He may be in danger——"

"He hasn't met with any accident, we are sure of that," Mrs. White interrupted reassuringly. "And if he has run away, thinking that he might be connected in some way with the fire, he will return when he thinks the alarm has died down."

"But in the meantime he may be in danger," reiterated Dorothy. "It seems dreadful to have a boy of Joe's age roaming around the world alone and unprotected. Aunt Winnie, we must do something. We must!"

"We are doing something, dear," Mrs. White reminded her soothingly. "Ned and Nat are leaving no stone unturned to discover the whereabouts of the lad and they are not going to stop hunting until they find him. And now go back to your father, my dear," she added. "You seem to be the only one who can content him just now."

"No one knows what may happen to Daddy if we don't find Joe soon!" muttered Dorothy, as she turned to leave the room.

It seemed that Dorothy Dale had her full share of trouble just then but, as it happened, fate had still a little more in store for her. And, indeed, it would probably have been the straw too much if Tavia, with her native tact, had not kept the worry from her.

For Roger, the youngest of the family, had felt Joe's disappearance more keenly perhaps than any of the others, because he had less philosophy to bear his sorrows.

And since his admission to Dorothy that his brother had been in the company of Jack Popella on the day of the fire, his conscience had troubled him rather badly and his one thought was to get Joe and beg his pardon for his perfidy before some one else could tell him of it.

With this thought in mind, Roger started out bravely and manfully to find his older brother.

He left the house early in the afternoon, presumably to play with some of the neighborhood children, and his prolonged absence was not remarked till nearly dinner time.

Then it was Tavia who, looking up the boy for the purpose of herself asking him some question concerning Joe, learned that he had been absent for several hours.

"I may be an idiot to worry," she said, taking her suspicions to Nat, "but I do think that we ought to set out on the trail of that youngster and bring him back before Doro has a chance to discover his absence. What do you think?"

"That you are right, as usual," returned Nat, with a fond glance at the pretty Tavia. "We'll be back in jig time with that young cousin of mine by the collar."

CHAPTER VIII

THE SEARCH

NAT and Tavia got out the old *Fire Bird* machine that had seen them through many adventures in order to cover the ground with "full speed ahead," to use Nat's own phrase.

"Something tells me our young wanderer may have strayed far afield," remarked Nat, as he manipulated things in preparation for the start. "We shall need all the gas and ingenuity we have if we are to return the kidlet before Dot discovers his absence."

"He may only be playing in perfectly harmless fashion with his mates," remarked Tavia, as she gloried in the sting of the wind against her face. "I probably am just scaring up trouble."

"I hope so!" said Nat dubiously, and Tavia looked at him quickly.

"But you think not!" she said. "Am I right?"

"As always!" He smiled and then added gravely: "Roger is an obedient lad, you know, and he has been told always to be in the house by five o'clock. The fact that it is now approaching six and Roger still at large seems ominous to me."

"Nat, do you think—" began Tavia slowly, "do you think that Roger may have gone to find Joe?"

"That's just what he would be apt to do, good little sport that he is," said Nat, troubled eyes on the road ahead. "Poor Dot! I hate to think how she will feel if we fail to bring back the bacon, in the shape of my young cousin."

"Where are you going, Nat dear?" asked Tavia, after a moment of silence. "You seem to have some definite objective."

"I have," declared Nat, as he slowed down before an imposing white house. "I am going to visit the home of every kid in the neighborhood that Roger plays with. Then, if I fail to gain a clue, I haven't the faintest idea what to do next."

"Never give up till you try," urged Tavia. "Hurry, Nat—do! I feel as though I were on pins and needles."

"Not very comfortable," returned Nat, grinning, as he swung his long legs over the car door without bothering to open it.

Tavia watched him swing up the drive, ring the bell of the imposing white house, and, a moment later, hold converse with the owner of it. She knew by the manner in which he came back to her that the interview had been disappointing.

"Nothing doing," he said in response to her tacit question. "The lady of the house, backed

by the kid in there, says they haven't seen our youngster to-day."

"The plot thickens," murmured Tavia. "Poor Doro. What shall we tell her?"

"Hold your horses, young lady," Nat advised her. "We have several other places to visit before we begin to give up hope. We'll find him yet."

Although they made a thorough canvass of all the homes in the neighborhood which contained familiars, or possible familiars, of the missing Roger, their quest was unsuccessful. No one seemed to have seen the missing youngster that day, and Nat and Tavia were forced to admit that, so far, their mission had failed.

"You are not going to give up yet, Nat?" cried Tavia quickly, as Nat started to turn the nose of the *Fire Bird* toward home. "Why, we have not even *begun* to look!"

Nat shut off the power and regarded his companion in perplexity.

"It seems to me we have made not only a beginning, but an ending, as well," he protested. "I can't think of another place where the boy might be, and I thought perhaps we had better go back and see if they have heard anything at The Cedars. If he is back there, safe and sound, we are having all our trouble and worry for nothing."

"Oh, please don't go back yet," begged Tavia.

"I have an idea, Nat," she added, with sudden eagerness. "If Roger has the notion that Joe has taken a train from the North Birchlands station, what would be more natural than for him to head stationwards himself?"

"Brilliant mind!" ejaculated Nat, manipulating the car into another right-about-face. "We will proceed to the station immediately."

"But not by the main road, Nat," urged Tavia. "Through the woods, by that old wagon road, don't you remember?"

Nat regarded her as though he thought she might have gone temporarily insane.

"But, my dear girl, why——" he began, but Tavia impatiently interrupted him.

"Oh, you men are so stupid!" she cried. "You never can think of anything without a map to help you. Can't you see that Roger, hoping to escape attention, would take the path through the woods, rather than go by the main thoroughfare?"

"Yes, I can," replied Nat. "But I am very doubtful as to whether we shall be able to guide the old *Fire Bird* through that same path you mention. The wagon road is almost entirely overgrown with rank grass and weeds, you know. It would be a clever trick to navigate it in the day time, and now, as you can see for yourself, the twilight approachs on rapid feet."

"Then we will park the car and walk," said Tavia imperiously. "Nat, won't you do this much for me?"

"My dear, I would do far more than that for you," Nat assured her, and Tavia's bright eyes softened at his tone.

They turned the *Fire Bird* in the direction of the woods, found the old wagon road, and drove along it as far as they were able.

Then Nat helped Tavia to the rough ground and they started on a walk that was more nearly a run. Having come this far, Tavia found herself obsessed by the belief that there was urgent need of haste.

She would have rushed blindly on through the shadow-filled woods had not Nat, at her elbow, gently restrained her, urging that she take her time.

"Nothing will be gained if you stumble over a root and break your leg," he told her, and Tavia replied indignantly that she had no intention of being so foolish.

"I feel as though Roger were in danger of some sort, Nat," she said, during one of those pauses when they had sent their combined voices echoing and reechoing through the woods. "I feel as though we ought to run every step of the way."

"And probably Roger is at The Cedars, enjoying his dinner by this time," rejoined Nat, as

they started on again. "Don't let your imagination run away with you, my dear."

Her nerves already on edge, Tavia was about to retort sharply but closed her lips just in time. Nothing would be gained by quarreling with Nat. They would only waste time.

They hurried on until they came out of the woodland and found themselves almost upon the North Birchlands station.

They inquired of the agent at the ticket office whether a small boy had come that way and the man replied in the negative.

Discouraged, they turned to go back the way they had come. They walked on in troubled silence, wondering how they could break this bad news to Dorothy.

"He may have wandered off into the woods and been unable to find his way out," suggested Tavia, and Ned agreed with her that he might.

"Although Joe and Roger know these woods like a book," he added. "Roger probably couldn't get lost in them if he tried."

"Anyway, we had better look around a bit," Tavia insisted. "I am dreadfully worried, Nat."

Nat took her hand, and, like two children, they started into the denser part of the woodland, calling as they went.

"It's like hunting for a needle in a haystack," Nat said at last, as they paused to rest. "We

might do this all night and still not be any nearer finding Roger."

"But, anyway, we can try, Nat," Tavia persisted. "I can't bear to go back to Doro empty-handed. She will be crazy."

So they went on again, calling as they went, until the woods began to grow really dark and even Tavia was almost ready to give up the search for the time being.

"My one hope is that while we have been looking for him he has found his way back to The Cedars," she said, as they started slowly back toward the weed-choked wagon road. "If he isn't there I don't know what we can do."

"Listen! I thought I heard something!" Nat checked her, a hand on her arm.

Tavia paused obediently and in the almost eerie silence of the woodland she could hear her heart throbbing.

"What do you mean?" she gasped. "I didn't hear anything."

"There it is again—over this way," cried Nat, and began to run, pulling the girl with him.

CHAPTER IX

IN THE TREE

In a moment Tavia too heard it—a boyish cry in that vast, silent woodland.

"Roger!" she panted, almost sobbing. "Oh, Nat, is it Roger?"

"Guess so," said Nat grimly. "But I declare I don't know where the boy can be. Sounds as if he were hanging in the air somewhere over our heads."

"Listen a moment," suggested Tavia.

They paused, and again they heard the faint cry. It was strangely like and yet unlike Roger's voice. It seemed, as Nat had said, to come from the air above them. An eerie sensation at that hour in the fast-darkening woods.

Tavia felt the hair beginning to creep on her scalp, yet it was she urged Nat on again.

They knew they were coming nearer that voice, for it sounded continually louder in their ears. Yet they still could not locate it.

At last, when they were about ready to give up in despair, Tavia was startled to hear the voice again, and, this time, right over her head.

"I'm up here," it said quaveringly. "And I can't hold on much longer. If you don't give me a hand I'll fall and break my neck!"

Tavia felt an hysterical desire to laugh. Roger was up in a tree. Of course! How foolish of them not to have thought of that sooner.

Nat, after one eager glance up into the shadowy branches of the tree, had already begun to scale its rough bark.

"Hold on for a minute, old man," he shouted to the disembodied voice aloft. "I'll bring you down in a jiffy."

"But my hand's slipping." wailed the voice again. "You'd better hurry, Nat. Oo-oo—I'm gonna fall!"

Alarmed at this prohecy in spite of Nat's rapid progress toward the rescue, Tavia went close to the tree, straining her eyes to catch a glimpse of the small form hidden among the branches.

"I'm here, Roger darling! It's Tavia," she called. "If you have to let go I'll catch you! I will if it kills us both!"

"He isn't going to let go—he isn't that kind of bad sport," said Nat's voice above her head. "I'll grab you in a minute, kid. Can you slide along that branch a bit. That's the idea. Take it easy, now."

"I—I'll try," said Roger's voice faintly, and Tavia heard a rustle among the leaves that told

her the boy was doing his best to aid his rescuer.

"Ow, I'm slipping!" he yelled suddenly. "Catch me, Nat!"

Tavia felt a cold chill run up and down her spine at that frantic cry, but the next moment she was reassured.

"All right, old timer, I've got you," said Nat's voice. "Just grab hold of me now and we'll be down on *terra firma* in a jiffy. That's the kid! Ready now?"

"Y-yes," came Roger's unsteady response, and Tavia knew he was fighting off the tears of weariness and fright. "We ain't very far from the ground, though, are we, Nat?"

"Not very far, old boy," responded Nat jocularly. "Not half as far as if we were twice as far."

Tavia heard Roger chuckle and blessed Nat for his quick tact. He had saved the small boy the humiliation of tears.

There was the sound of scrambling and sliding and Tavia saw Nat, one arm about Roger, hang from a sturdy lower branch, then drop to the ground.

He set his small cousin gently on the ground and carefully brushed the leaves and twigs from his clothing.

"Now you'll do, old man," he announced, adding suddenly: "Pretty near starved, aren't you?"

"I—I—guess so," returned Roger quaveringly, and Tavia longed to put her arms about him and comfort him. She knew better, however, and merely took his hand firmly in her own and led the way back to the old wagon road and the waiting *Fire Bird*.

"We've got the car and we will have you home in a jiffy, Roger," she said cheerfully. "I reckon the folks there will be glad to see you."

"Dorothy will be awful scared, I guess," he remarked hesitantly. "It must be awful late."

"It is and she will," Tavia retorted promptly, and at the hint of reproach in her voice the small boy seemed once more on the verge of tears.

"I couldn't help it," he cried, with a catch in his voice that he could not control no matter how hard he tried. "I—I just had to find Joe an' tell him—something," he finished weakly.

"Well, did you?" asked Nat, with good-natured sarcasm.

"No," admitted Roger dispiritedly. "I thought I might maybe take the train because that must 'a' been the way Joe went, but I just happened to think that I didn't have any money."

"That is apt to be a slight drawback," admitted Nat gravely, and thereupon launched into a short lecture on the wickedness of small boys who went anywhere without first gaining the consent of those at home.

"But Joe did it," Roger interrupted once, wonderingly. "And Joe is not a bad boy."

"He is at least unwise," murmured Tavia, and Nat was forced to explain that Joe, though not in any sense wicked, had been foolish and thoughtless to do the thing he had done.

"But I just had to go and find him," Roger persisted. "And how could I do it if I didn't take the train?"

At the prospect of having to begin his lecture all over again, Nat gave up in despair and changed the subject.

"Do you mind telling me, old lad," he asked gravely, "how you happened to be using that tree for a parking place——"

"And a rather insecure one at that," murmured Tavia, with a chuckle.

"At an hour when, by all rights, you should have been at home and in bed?" finished Nat.

Tavia felt the small boy's hand tighten in hers and knew that he was about to recall what had been, to him, a rather dreadful experience.

"I was walking around in the woods, thinking I might find Joe," he explained, "when I saw something funny and black coming through the woods."

"Oh," shivered Tavia, in mock terror. "How terrible! What was it?"

"It was only a dog, but I thought it was a

bear." By the disgust in his voice it was evident his mistake had chagrined the boy deeply.

"And you climbed a tree to get away from the bear?" suggested Nat. "Am I right?"

"It was as easy as pie getting up," Roger agreed.

"But when you tried to get down you found you had bitten off more than you could chew, eh?" asked Tavia.

Roger was offended.

"Ah, you fellers won't let a kid tell his own story!" he complained, and Tavia had all she could do to keep from going off into fresh spasms of laughter and thus offending the boy still more deeply.

Tavia could hear Nat chuckle in the darkness, though his voice was tremendously grave as he apologized.

"Awfully sorry, old chap," he said. "We will try to do better from now on. What happened next?"

"Nothing—nothing much, anyway," responded Roger, partially mollified. "When I saw it was only a dog and he just sniffed and went away I tried to get down again and I couldn't. I had got away out near the end of the branch, because bears can climb trees, you know——"

"But this wasn't a bear," Tavia reminded him gravely.

"Well, I didn't know that when I was climbing out there, did I?" demanded Roger peevishly, and Nat's hand closed over Tavia's with a warning pressure.

"And when I tried to get back again," Roger continued, "I couldn't. I tried and I tried and then I tried yelling. But nobody must uv heard me, because nobody came," he concluded dolefully.

"Except us! Don't forget your old Uncle Nat, my boy," Nat reminded him.

"Oh, you're not my uncle; you're just my cousin," Roger retorted, and Tavia giggled.

"How's that for gratitude?" she crowed, and Nat chuckled.

"Anyway, you have to admit—uncle or cousin —that I turned the trick and got you down," he said to Roger.

"Yes," the small boy admitted, adding reminiscently: "But you did pinch my arm something awful!"

While this was happening, Dorothy, all unconscious of it, was having an exciting adventure of her own.

Ned White had come to her soon after Tavia and Nat had left The Cedars on their quest for the missing Roger and revealed excitedly that he thought he had "raked up" a clue that might

throw light on the mysterious circumstances surrounding Joe's disappearance.

"I met a fellow who lives at Scranting," he said, mentioning a township some miles further out than North Birchlands. "He says that he remembers seeing a chap around the railroad station there who might answer Joe's description. It's only a chance, Dorothy—the boy probably was not Joe at all—but it seems to me the clue is worth following up."

"Any clue is worth following up," cried Dorothy, instantly aquiver with hope. "Are you going to Scranting now? Because if you are, I am going with you."

Ned hesitated.

"It is almost dinner time," he reminded her, but Dorothy broke in impatiently.

"Oh, what difference does that make? We can snatch a bite in Scranting if we have to. Ned, you mustn't put me off."

"But there's another thing, Dot," Ned demurred, troubled. "I went to get out the *Fire Bird* just now and she isn't in the garage. Nat must have beaten me to it. He and Tavia are among the missing. Joy riding, probably."

Dorothy's brow clouded. If, as Ned suggested, her chum and Nat were joy riding, such a procedure seemed heartless to her, in view of all the

trouble at The Cedars. Then, too, Tavia might have guessed that they would need the car.

In the excitement of her father's illness and this new announcement of Ned's, she had not yet remarked the absence of Roger.

Now she turned to Ned decisively.

"We will go by train then. There is one that leaves North Birchlands in half an hour. Can we make it?"

CHAPTER X

A CLUE

NED opined that they could make the train and he and Dorothy began immediately to get ready.

Dorothy stole one of the precious minutes to tell Major Dale where they were going and why, for she knew that hope, even if only temporary, would benefit him.

"I hate to leave him," she told Ned, as they hurried down the stairs. "He seems so much brighter when I am with him."

"And no wonder!" said Ned gallantly. Then as he stole a glance at Dorothy's weary face, he went on: "Poor little Dot! If she could only divide herself in about six pieces every one would be happy!"

"Except Dot, perhaps," said Dorothy ruefully.

They made the train with time to spare and settled back to endure the short trip to Scranting. Their minds were so filled with hopes and fears and questionings that they found little to say to each other.

Ned was thinking for the most part of pretty Jennie Haygood, to whom he had become engaged

during her last visit to the The Cedars, and wishing that he might run down and "have a talk with her." But with all the trouble and worry at The Cedars, he felt, and rightly, that his first duty was to those at home. He would help Dorothy to find Joe and then, he declared grimly to himself, he would see Jennie every day for at least three months!

Dorothy's thoughts were of her father and of Joe and—of Garry. If Garry were only here to help her!

The train stopped at Scranting with a jolt and Ned helped Dorothy to alight.

"This fellow I spoke of who thought he saw Joe here works for the railroad," he hurriedly explained, as they started along the platform. "He says the ticket agent here is an acquaintance of his and may be able to give us valuable information."

"Then let's hurry," urged Dorothy, soon adding in a voice only a little above a whisper: "Oh, Ned, I am frightened!"

"What about?" asked her cousin wonderingly.

"Oh, I am so afraid he may not be able to tell us anything!"

They found the ticket agent an agreeable man, and, as this was not the rush hour with him, he obligingly came forth from the small room at the back of the station to answer their questions.

Ned explained to him about Geoffrey Hodgson, the man who thought he had seen Joe in Scranting and who had referred Ned for further information to the railroad man.

"From your description I am very sure I saw the lad," the agent returned, and Dorothy leaned forward scarcely breathing for fear of losing his next words. "Perhaps it was his air of haste that particularly impressed itself upon my mind."

"Did this boy come here to board a train?" asked Dorothy, and the words, the first she had spoken, sounded strange to her.

The man nodded and in his eyes were both sympathy and admiration. There was no doubt that the young lady was extremely pretty and neither was there any doubt that she was very much concerned with the actions of this particular young runaway scamp. He had a sudden and very sincere desire to help Dorothy Dale in whatever way he could.

"He took the four-fifteen for the West, Miss," he said. "It was a flyer, and I guess that suited the young gentleman all right for he certainly seemed in a tremendous hurry."

"The West!" murmured Dorothy, and a bright spot began to burn in each cheek. For Dorothy was suddenly possessed of an idea.

"That reminds me, I have something to show you," said their obliging informant, rising sud-

denly to his feet. "If you will wait just a minute ——" and he returned hurriedly to his office.

Ned and Dorothy looked at each other and the young man shook his head ruefully.

"Not much help," he said. "Doesn't do us over much good to know that Joe took a train for the West."

Dorothy pursed her lips and looked mysterious.

"I am not so sure!" she said.

Ned stared, but before he could open his lips to ask the question that trembled on them the agent was back again, holding something in his hand.

He sat down beside Dorothy and held something out to her which she found on closer inspection to be a cap.

She gave a little cry and caught it in her hands, gazing at it with misted eyes. For it was not just any cap. It was Joe's cap!

"What's the row?" asked Ned curiously. "What's that you've got?"

Dorothy could not speak, but in silence handed the cap to him.

Ned gave a low whistle.

"Exhibit A," he muttered. "There isn't a doubt in the world but what this is Joe's head gear! What do you make of that, Dot?"

Dorothy shook her head and turned to the interested railroad man.

"Do you mind telling me where you got that cap?" she said unsteadily.

"The lad left it behind in his hurry," he replied. "I saw it lying on the bench and, thinking the boy might return for it, put it away in the office."

"Oh, that was awfully good of you," said Dorothy. "You don't know how very much this means to me."

The agent looked embarrassed, for he was one of those kind-hearted men who cannot take thanks gracefully and, as several people entered the station at that moment, he excused himself and took his place again at the window.

Seeing that they had all the information they were likely to get from this source, Ned pocketed the cap that Joe had left behind him and they crossed the tracks to the opposite platform of the station, there to take the return train to North Birchlands.

On the way back Ned was excited and talkative but Dorothy was very quiet.

"Why is it that every kid who wants to run away immediately heads west?" asked Ned of an inattentive and thoughtful Dorothy. "Sometimes they make a break for the seacoast, but more often it is the wild and woolly that tempts the youthful imagination. Say, Dot," he added, struck by a sudden thought, "why in the world

didn't we ask that fellow how far west Joe was going?"

"Because we are a couple of idiots, I guess," returned Dorothy. "However, we can still ask him—by telephone."

"How much money did the boy have?" asked Ned, with apparent irrelevance.

"Not much," replied Dorothy sadly. "He couldn't have got so very far, Ned."

It seemed only a moment before the train slowed to a stop at North Birchlands. Dorothy and Ned walked rapidly homewards, eager to share this new development with the family. But when they reached The Cedars they found so much worry and excitement rampant there that they temporarily forgot their own adventures.

Roger was gone, had disappeared as completely, it seemed, as Joe!

Dorothy sank down in a chair and covered her eyes with her hand.

"This is too much," she said. "I don't believe I can stand any more."

Then she was on her feet in an instant again her eyes bright, cheeks hot.

"No one has told Dad this?" she asked, and her Aunt Winnie replied quickly and soothingly in the negative.

"We would not have told him in any case until you returned, dear," she said, soon adding, with

attempted reassurance: "I really don't think this is serious."

"Serious!" repeated Dorothy. "Not serious that little Roger is lost, as well as Joe?" Then she asked, looking about her as though she had missed her chum for the first time: "Where is Tavia?"

"She and Nat have not come in yet," replied Mrs. White, the worried lines deepening in her forehead. "I can't imagine what can be keeping them."

Then Dorothy remembered. Tavia and Nat had gone out in the *Fire Bird.* Even her chum had deserted her. She felt suddenly very helpless and forlorn.

There came the sound of an automobile on the drive without, the sharp tooting of a motor horn —undeniably the *Fire Bird.*

They all dashed to the door and flung it open just as Tavia's glad cry rang through the darkness:

"Hello, everybody. We've got Roger!"

CHAPTER XI

DOROTHY REACHES A DECISION

TAVIA made a rush for Dorothy and caught her in her arms, hugging her hard.

"Darling Doro, see what we've brought you," she cried, and drew forward into the circle of light a sheepish and very much subdued Roger.

Dorothy sank to her knees before Roger and hugged him to her until he grunted. This was purely physical, however, for the returned prodigal was willing for once that his big sister should make as much fuss over him as she wished. It was not much fun to be stuck up in a tree far away from home and it was most awfully good to be with his family again. Then, too, he had feared a scolding and Dorothy's greeting was a welcome substitute.

It was some time before they were calm enough to discuss the details of the rescue. But when finally Nat and Tavia did describe the small boy's peril and rescue, Dorothy was ashamed to think how she had misjudged her chum. She ought to have known by this time how right Tavia's heart was where her friends were concerned.

They had dinner then, a merry one in spite of the shadow of worry and anxiety that still hung heavy on their minds. Despite his famished state, Roger was so exhausted by the strenuous and exciting events of the past few hours that he almost fell asleep in his chair and had to be helped to bed before he had half finished his dinner.

Dorothy, looking down at his sleeping face, so dear and innocent on the pillow, felt her eyes smart with fresh tears. Kneeling down beside the bed, she pressed her cheek to his soft one.

"Don't ever do a thing like that again," she whispered. "What would Doro do if anything happened to her Roger?"

One small arm twined about her neck and Roger half opened his eyes, smiled sleepily.

"Roger—loves—Doro," he murmured, and fell asleep.

On the way downstairs Dorothy stopped in the Major's room to see how he fared and found him also asleep. She would not disturb him now till morning although she knew how eagerly he would grasp at the one small item of news concerning Joe that she had to tell him.

If Joe were only there too, beneath the familiar roof, asleep—Dorothy sighed, closed the door gently, and went on downstairs.

"Ned has just been telling us about Joe's cap, Doro," said Tavia, as she entered the room. "Is-

n't it marvelous? We have an honest-to-goodness clue at last."

"Although I can't see where it leads us——"

"To the West, of course," interrupted Tavia. "How dull you are, Nat."

Nat grinned good-naturedly.

"The West is a large place, young lady," he reminded her. "And one that it is possible for a lad to get pretty completely lost in."

"We will find to-morow what town or city he bought his ticket to," said Dorothy. "And then we can act accordingly."

"That sounds as if the fair Dorothy were about to get busy in earnest," said Tavia, with a shrewd glance at her chum. "Have you made any plans yet, Doro?"

"Nothing definite," Dorothy confessed. "I want to talk with Dad first."

It was Major Dale himself who asked for Dorothy on the following morning, and father and daughter were closeted together for the better part of an hour.

When Dorothy at last emerged from the interview her cheeks were flushed and her mouth determined.

Tavia, who had been eagerly awaiting an opportunity to talk to her chum, was the first to notice this change in her.

"You look as though you were on the war path, Doro. What's up?"

Dorothy held a finger to her lips as Ned's voice at the telephone came up to them.

"He's calling Scranting," Dorothy explained in a whisper. "Listen!"

They listened with breathless interest to Ned's disjointed monologue.

"This Mr. Dougherty, Scranting station? Mr. Dougherty, Miss Dale and I forgot to ask you a very important question last night—. Oh, you thought of it too, did you?—Chicago! Where did the kid get all that money?—Yes.—All right. Many thanks for the information.—Yes, I will.—Thanks again. Good-bye!"

"Chicago!" repeated Tavia, whistling softly. "That city is a considerable distance from this place, Doro. Why, what's the matter?" She broke off and stared at her chum wonderingly.

For, impossible as it seemed to her, Dorothy's lips had curved suddenly in such a smile as Tavia had not seen for days.

"Oh, nothing!" said this amazing Doro. "I was just thinking that intuition is a wonderful thing sometimes!"

Even by persistent questioning Tavia was not able to discover the reason for what she called Dorothy's "Mona Lisa smile," but she did succeed in extracting other valuable information.

Dorothy was to follow the one clue they possessed, though it was a slight one.

"But how on earth can you go out West all alone, Doro?" cried Tavia, when her chum had announced her decision to the rather startled and excited family group.

"I didn't intend to," returned Dorothy with assumed ingenuousness. "I thought perhaps one, Tavia Travers, would like to go with me."

"Good gracious, I was only scared to death for fear you wouldn't ask me," Tavia confessed. "When do we start, Doro?"

"Hold your horses a minute, will you?" cried Nat. "You two girls aren't going on a journey like that all alone—not by a long shot!"

"O-ho! The cave man speaks!" gibed Tavia. "Who says we are not, Mr. Smarty?"

"You really ought to stay here, Nat," Dorothy interposed swiftly. "We need both you and Ned here on the spot, both to take care of Dad and follow up any new clue that may turn up."

"Well, I like that!" exclaimed Nat, chagrined. "That's being relegated to the rocking chair for fair."

"But you will do that for me, won't you, Nat?" begged Dorothy. "Can't you see it's the best way?"

"Well, no, I can't say that I can," confessed

Nat. "But if you want it that way, Dot, I can but oblige."

"What are you going to do after you reach Chicago?" Mrs. White asked. "Have you thought of that?"

"I suppose we shall have to leave our future conduct to chance," said Tavia flippantly, and Dorothy slowly nodded acquiescence.

"We may come up against a dead wall," Dorothy admitted. "But there is just a chance that we may pick up a clue there that will be useful. Anyway, Dad thinks the chance is worth taking, and I do too."

So it was decided that the two girls were to start for Chicago the following day, "traveling light."

After they had gone to their rooms that night and Tavia was brushing her hair before the mirror, Dorothy stole in to her and whispered:

"Tavia, if I tell you a secret will you promise never to tell a soul?"

CHAPTER XII

A GUESS

"Cross my heart and hope to die," said Tavia. "Tell me quickly ere I pass away with suspense."

"Well, I have a very good suspicion which way Joe headed.

"He headed West——"

"Exactly! And straight for the ranch of one young Westerner called Garry Knapp."

Tavia looked at her chum hard for a moment, then waved the hair brush aloft in a jubilant gesture.

"I do believe you have struck it, Doro!" she cried. "Of course that is the obvious thing for him to do."

"He always loved Garry——"

"Seems to run in the family," interrupted Tavia.

"And he would naturally go to him for help and advice at this time."

"He hasn't reached his objective yet, if Garry's ranch is the objective," Tavia pointed out. "If he had, Garry would have telegraphed."

"I've thought of that, of course," admitted

Dorothy. "But then, if he went directly he has hardly had time yet. Anyway, there is no use guessing any longer," and she rose abruptly from the bed and gave Tavia a good-night hug. "To-morrow we begin to act."

"For which, thanks be!" said Tavia fervently.

It was a very much disgruntled Nat who saw them off the following morning. The waiting end of a game was never a pleasant one to him. And, it meant losing Tavia for an indefinite time!

However, Tavia managed to tear herself away finally, and after Dorothy also had been hugged and kissed the train moved off and the two girls sank back in their seats with a feeling of relief that at last their adventure was in motion.

Tavia brought forth the two-pound box of candy that the boys had bestowed upon her and her chum and began contentedly to untie the ribbon that bound it.

"Have one, Doro?" The latter shook her head. She was too full of anxiety for Joe and the dear ones at home to think about anything else.

The Major had seemed very frail that morning when he had said good-bye, but there had been an eager light in his eyes that she understood only too well. He had been thinking that the next time he saw his daughter, Joe might be with her.

And Joe would be with her! Dorothy's chin

went up and her eyes gleamed in a manner curiously suggestive of the Major in the days when the success of the *Bugle* meant everything to him.

"Good gracious, Doro, don't look like that!" cried Tavia, happening that moment to glance at her chum. "You remind me of bulldogs and prize fighters and other pugnacious animals."

"How extremely complimentary you are," laughed Dorothy. "I'll have you know that though I can't get over the fact that I'm an animal, I'm not pugnacious."

"Far be it from me to contradict a lady," retorted Tavia. "But if you could have seen yourself at that moment, Doro, I am sure you wouldn't blame me."

"Glad I didn't then," replied Dorothy a trifle crossly. "It must be an awful bore to see yourselves as others see you."

"Well, take off your hat, anyway," advised Tavia irrelevantly. "We have quite a little ride before us, you know."

"As if I hadn't lain awake all night thinking of that!" cried Dorothy. "And every minute of the journey will seem like an hour."

"Now who is being uncomplimentary?" chuckled Tavia. "You must expect to enjoy your company."

"I don't expect to enjoy anything again until I

get news of Joe," answered Dorothy morosely, and Tavia sighed gustily.

"Here's where all my efforts at entertainment fall upon barren ground," she prophesied. "Like casting pearls before swine, you know."

"Are you, by any chance, calling me names?" asked Dorothy, giggling in spite of herself.

"I wouldn't do such a thing," protested Tavia virtuously. "I was thinking of that cute little pig I just saw beside the road. Honestly, he was awfully cute. His tail was all curled up and he had the pinkest nose——"

"Goodness, Tavia, if you can't be sensible I am going out and sit on the observation platform by myself. I don't want to hear about pigs."

"I don't know but what your suggestion about the observation platform is a good one, at that," remarked Tavia, unmoved. "Did you notice that perfectly stunning man who passed through our car a few minutes ago? He looked straight at you and you looked straight through him."

"Was he a ghost?" giggled Dorothy.

"Far from it!" returned Tavia, with a reproving stare. "He was an extremely substantial looking young man, and from the way he looked at you I shouldn't wonder but that your amazing beauty had quite bowled him over, Doro, my dear."

"Well, I hope he stays bowled," returned Doro-

thy unfeelingly. "Something tells me that's where he belongs."

"Pearls before—" began Tavia, but this time Dorothy rebelled.

"I won't be called a pig again, Tavia Travers!"

"Such a cute little pig!"

Dorothy fumbled at the car window and looked back at Tavia suggestively.

"Will you stop, or shall I jump?"

"Better wait till the train slows down a bit," replied Tavia calmly. "Going at this rate of speed, you might skin your knuckles or something."

Dorothy sank back in her seat with a sigh of resignation.

"I think I shall go to the observation platform, after all," she said, but before she could rise Tavia seized her arm and cried excitedly:

"He is coming back!"

Dorothy shook her arm free and frowned.

"Well, what of it?"

"And he has a companion," added Tavia. "Good gracious, if I ever saw a desperado, Dorothy Dale, that man is it!"

Interested in spite of herself by Tavia's description, Dorothy turned her head and beheld two men approaching down the car aisle, lurching as the train lurched.

One was the tall, dark, good-looking stranger who Tavia had vulgarly declared was "bowled over" by Dorothy's beauty. His companion could not have been more completely his opposite. A short, squat fellow with a flat face and sharp black eyes, he looked for all the world like a bird of prey, ready to snatch at his victim.

Dorothy, as she shudderingly appraised the man, was glad she was not to be his victim. The next moment she was laughing at her melodramatic thoughts.

"Probably a traveling salesman or something equally innocuous," she whispered, as the two men passed close to them.

"He's a desperado," Tavia reiterated stubbornly. "You mark my words—that fellow will come to no good end—"

At that moment it seemed as if they all were to come to a very bad end indeed.

There came a deafening crash and the car in which Dorothy and Tavia sat seemed to rear up in the middle, like a balky horse.

"Good gracious, hold on to me, Doro!" shrieked Tavia. "It's the end of the world!"

CHAPTER XIII

DERAILED

THERE was shrieking and confusion from one end of the train to the other as the car righted itself again. With a horrid noise of scraping brakes the cars ahead came to a jolting standstill.

Tavia was out of her seat bent on joining the general stampede for the door, but Dorothy held her back firmly.

"You will be hurt in that rush!" she cried. "Wait a minute; do, Tavia."

Tavia obeyed, and crouched down in the seat and covered her eyes with her trembling hands.

"Oh, listen to those cries, Doro!" she wailed presently. "Somebody must be horribly hurt."

"Just hysterics, Miss."

A man, one of those who had been the first to jump from the train, returned and sank into a seat opposite the two girls. "The car ahead of us jumped the track, and it's a mercy the whole train wasn't wrecked. As it is, they ain't nothing to worry about, except that we may be tied up here for some considerable time."

Tavia uncovered her eyes and looked at him. Dorothy had already done so and had risen from her seat and started hastily for the door, because this man who had undertaken to reassure them was none other than the villainous-looking companion of the tall dark stranger!

At her sudden motion the man put out his hand and made as though to rise.

"Better not go out there just now, Miss," he said, his beady black eyes resting upon her admiringly. "The crowd is still mighty hysterical and it's possible you might get hurt."

Dorothy might have retorted that she preferred the hysterical crowd to the doubtful pleasure of his company, but she held her tongue.

Instead she smiled noncommittally and held out her hand to Tavia.

"Come along, dear," she begged. "There may be something we can do out there."

"I tell you there ain't nobody hurt," again put in the small, squat man in a faintly irritable voice. "Better stay right here—"

But the two girls were already half way to the door, Tavia accompanying her chum grumblingly.

"Every time anything interesting happens, Doro, you have to come along and spoil everything."

"If you call that fellow interesting, then I am disappointed in your common sense," retorted

Dorothy tartly. "Sometimes, Tavia, I really think you need a nurse."

"Well, any time that I feel like engaging one, I'll tell you," drawled Tavia, angered in her turn, and there fell an uncomfortable silence between the girls.

Mechanically they walked through the excited crowd on the platform to the spot where the car had jumped the track. There it stood, its wheels on the gravel bed of the roadside, tilted crazily and only held upright by the cars in front and at the rear of it.

"The people in this car must have been jolted up for fair. Thought it was an earthquake or something," murmured Tavia, interest getting the better of her anger at Dorothy. "It's a wonder we didn't have an honest-to-goodness wreck out of this."

"It was the quick wit of the engineer who saved us, I guess," said a musical voice behind her, and, astonished, the two girls turned about to find behind them the tall good-looking stranger who had caught Tavia's particular attention.

The eyes of the irrepressible girl sparkled as she muttered in a tone audible only to Dorothy:

"We can't run amiss of 'em, no matter how hard we try."

Dorothy flushed with annoyance and pretended she had not heard the man's observation. Not so

Tavia! If for no other reason than to annoy her chum she determined to see the adventure through.

"We should get up a vote of thanks and send it to the engineer," she said in her sweetest tones. "He really was quite heroic. Fancy saving the lives of all the people on this train."

"Just fancy!" mimicked Dorothy bitterly, but the young man was not to be so easily discouraged.

He immediately ranged himself beside the two girls and launched into a boringly detailed account of the accident. In the middle of it Dorothy excused herself and hurried back to the car.

Her cheeks were hot and she felt unreasonably angry with Tavia. To her mind her chum had always been far too easy-going and casual with men, and this, Dorothy thought, was going a little too far.

It was not that Tavia had responded to the stranger—that might have been excusable under the circumstances. It was the manner of her response.

She wondered if the offensive, squat man would still be occupying the seat opposite her when she returned to the car. She was busy framing a scathing speech as she ascended the car steps, but was immensely relieved a moment later to find that there was no need of delivering it.

The fellow had evidently been discouraged by

her manner—sufficiently, that is, to slightly dampen his enthusiasm.

Yet he still lingered uncomfortably near. Dorothy was annoyed and more than a little alarmed to find that he occupied a seat in the same car with her and Tavia.

On the entire trip then, they would be forced to suffer the annoyance of his presence, to ward off his offensive attentions.

Dorothy could see that he often glanced at her over the top of the paper he pretended to be reading and knew that it needed only a word or a glance from her to bring him instantly to her side.

She wished more than ever that Garry were with her. He would know how to deal with offensive strangers who took advantage of the confusion and excitement consequent upon a train accident to become familiar.

She thought of Tavia, still, presumably, busy fascinating the good-looking stranger. This was always an interesting pastime with Tavia, and it would probably be some time before she tired of it.

If she had the audacity to bring that man into their car—Dorothy gasped for, out of the corner of her eye, she saw that was just what Tavia was doing.

Her color high, she turned and looked steadily

out of the window as Tavia and her latest conquest approached. The latter seemed about to take the seat his unpleasant friend had so recently vacated but a glance at Dorothy's averted profile warned Tavia that, for the time, she had gone far enough.

"Thank you so much!" she said sweetly, sinking into the opposite seat and adroitly placing a box of candy—the gift of her new friend—upon the other half of the seat, so that there was no room left for him. "You are in this car, too, and going through to Chicago? How nice! Ah, yes, thank you," as the young man handed her a magazine that had fallen to the floor.

The latter lingered, indulging in inanities—or so Dorothy termed them—with Tavia, but evidently interested in Dorothy's stubbornly averted profile.

At length, as his room was so patently desired to his company, he reluctantly moved on, joining his unpleasant friend.

Tavia looked at Dorothy with a sparkle in her eye. Evidently she had been enjoying herself immensely and was in a conciliatory mood.

"Don't be mad with me, Doro, darling," she coaxed. "I know I'm a perfect simpleton. But I was born that way, you know. I really can't help it."

"You could help a good many things, Tavia,

if you wanted to," said Dorothy, turning away from the window. "Sometimes I wonder how you can be in love with Nat and still act the way you do."

"Well, I am in love with Nat and that's all that matters—to Nat and me," retorted Tavia, her voice suddenly hard and cold. "I think you are too absurdly conventional for words, Dorothy Dale. If you insist on being a spoil-sport, then you can be one by yourself. I don't intend to help you!"

And so began the quarrel—the first real one the girls had ever had, and one that lasted all through that miserable journey to Chicago.

Tavia, through a perverse desire to torment her chum, was almost constantly to be seen in the company of the young man whose name, according to him, was Stanley Blake.

Chicago came at last, and with it an immense relief to Dorothy Dale. Her relief vanished immediately, however, when she found that Stanley Blake had taken the place of a porter and was to carry their bags.

"He shan't carry mine," she said, in a sudden fury, to Tavia. "If you want to go on being an—an——"

"Idiot. You might as well say it," Tavia finished for her. "You can do as you please, Doro. If you want to make a scene over such a foolish

little thing—— Come on, be a sport," she added, suddenly conciliatory again. "What's your awful objection to saving a porter's tip?"

Dorothy bit her lips to keep back a flood of angry words. She could not very well make a scene by refusing the attentions of this man when Tavia so casually accepted them. She would, she decided, put up with Tavia's folly once more, but, after that— She was fortified by the knowledge that they were now at their journey's end and so would automatically dispense with the company of Stanley Blake and his fox-eyed friend.

They were in their room in the Blenheim Hotel at last. Tavia and she were alone.

"Thank goodness, we're rid of them," thought Dorothy, as she removed her hat and sank wearily upon the edge of the hard, hotel bed. "I hope I never have to see either of them again."

But she did, and that in a way that was not only unpleasant but exceedingly startling.

Descending with Tavia to the hotel dining room, Dorothy saw at a table near the door the very two persons whom she had so recently and fervently wished never to see again! Tavia had not seen them yet, and Dorothy prayed fervently that she might not.

The head waiter coming toward them and beaming benignly seemed like a rescuing angel to Dorothy. She must get Tavia seated some-

where, anywhere, before she became aware of the presence of Blake and his friend. To have again their company thrust upon her was unthinkable.

Even at that last moment she would have turned away, urged Tavia to go with her to some quiet, small restaurant outside. But it was too late. The head waiter already was guiding them toward a table.

The table was next to the one at which Blake and his friend sat, at the side and a little to the rear of it. Dorothy gasped, would have protested could she have done so without rousing the suspicion of her friend.

For Tavia was still blissfully unaware of anything unusual in the atmosphere. And the head waiter, with a beaming smile, had motioned one of the waiters to take their order.

Well, it couldn't be helped, thought Dorothy resignedly. If Tavia saw them she would have to. Lucky the two men were sitting with their backs toward the table where the chums were ensconced, and, by skillful maneuvering on Dorothy's part, Tavia also had her back turned to them.

Dorothy turned sideways so that only her profile would be exposed to view, if either of the men chanced to glance over his shoulder.

Suddenly she stiffened, for, coming to her with

a startling distinctness above the noise and chatter all about her, she heard a familiar name.

It was a very familiar name. The two men were talking about Garry Knapp!

"What is the matter, Doro?" asked Tavia, looking at her curiously. "You resemble a storybook detective on the eve of a startling discovery."

Dorothy motioned her sharply to be still.

"They are talking of Garry," she explained, in a tense whisper.

"Who? When? Where?" cried Tavia, screwing her head about most absurdly in a vain effort to bring the entire dining room within her range of vision at the same time. "What do you mean, Doro?"

Dorothy gestured toward the two men at the table next to them, at the same moment making an imploring gesture pleading silence.

"Why, Stanley Blake and his dear little friend!" exclaimed Tavia in a tone of pleased surprise. "Always turning up like the proverbial bad penny, aren't they, Doro? Do you mind if I ask them to join us?"

She half rose from the table as if about to carry out her preposterous threat, but Dorothy seized her fiercely by the arm and forced her back into her seat.

"If you move or say a word, I never will speak to you again!" she said, and at the vehemence

of the usually gentle Dorothy, Tavia looked surprised. However, she obeyed and remained curiously quiet.

Dorothy had missed something of what the men had said. She realized this with a sharp annoyance. But the next moment a wave of rage and fear swept over her, blotting out every other sensation.

They were not only speaking of Garry, these two men, but they were threatening him as well. She held her breath so that she might not miss one word of what was to follow.

"He is a kind of simple guy, this Dimples Knapp," the beady-eyed man was saying with a half-satisfied smirk. "Thinks this old world is made up of goody-goody stiffs who believe in the Golden Rule and go to church regular twice on Sundays. A cute little lamb to fleece!"

"And a nice fat, succulent one," added Stanley Blake, in a voice neither of the girls recognized. It had a cold, mean quality that made Dorothy shiver, though the dining room was hot.

She glanced at Tavia and saw the look of bewilderment and horror on her face. Tavia had "caught on" at last. She was beginning to find that Dorothy's aversion to these two men had been founded on something very much more real than a whim.

"What does it all mean, Doro?" she whispered,

"THEY ARE TALKING OF GARRY," SHE EXPLAINED, IN A TENSE WHISPER.

but once more Dorothy held up her hand for silence.

"Wait, and perhaps we shall hear," she said tensely.

"The fellow thinks he's goin' to have the best l'il wheat ranch in the West," went on Stanley's companion, pushing back his plate and lighting a cigar. "He's got the cash to do it and—I feel forced out o' the kindness of my heart to say it, Cal—he's got the brains. If it wasn't for that trustin' little disposition of his—" he did not finish the sentence, but ended with a chuckle, a thin, mean alien sound in that convivial atmosphere.

Dorothy was the victim of a chill fear. The man was like a snake, a mean, poisonous snake that would lie treacherously still in a crevice of rock awaiting the moment to strike at an unsuspecting prey.

She thought of that horrible moment during her first trip to Desert City, seemingly ages ago, when she had flung the rock that had snuffed out the life of the rattlesnake that had threatened the life of her chum. She had acted then swiftly, unerringly, not thinking of herself, but of Tavia's peril.

But this was another, a more venomous kind of reptile, and something told her he would be infinitely harder to deal with.

Stanley Blake was speaking now, and both she and Tavia listened breathlessly.

"You may think this fellow Dimples Knapp is easy game, Gibbons, but I know better," drawled the hero of Tavia's gay moments. "He may be as trusting as you say he is, but I tell you he's got friends that were not born yesterday. And they weren't born blind, either."

"I s'pose you mean that snoopin' Lance Petterby an' his gang," snarled the little man, and the girls started nervously. "Well, I'm goin' on record now to the effect that if he tries any funny business, it'll be the last time, that's all. You hear me, Cal, it'll be the last time!"

"Say, you poor little shrimp, will you cut out calling me by my first name? This is the second time you've done it in the last five minutes. Getting childish or something, aren't you?"

The man whose name quite obviously was not Stanley Blake glanced hastily about the room as he gave vent to these irritable remarks, and Dorothy turned hastily aside lest he should recognize her profile, and so put an end to his remarkable discourse.

However, though the men continued talking and, presumably, on the same subject, it did not take Dorothy long to realize that she would hear nothing further of importance that day.

The two men, evidently beset by an excess of

caution, had lowered their voices so that it was impossible to catch a word of their discourse.

Although the girls strained their ears, the conversation at the next table became only a confused mumbling and soon afterward the two men rose and left the dining room.

Although she had scarcely tasted her lunch, Dorothy rose too.

"Where are you going, Doro?" asked Tavia.

"To the office," said Dorothy. "I must send a telegram to Garry at once!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE WARNING

It was characteristic of Dorothy Dale that she did not once say to Tavia, "I told you so!" She might so easily have done so, considering her own distrust of these two men and Tavia's acceptance of them; of one of them, at least.

As for the latter, she was filled with chagrin to find that her handsome stranger was nothing but a cheap trickster after all—if indeed, he was not worse—and longed fervently to punish "Cal," *alias* Stanley Blake.

"Oh, you just watch we snub him the next time we meet," she cried, with relish. "I will make him feel about as little as the toy chameleon on his watch fob. Did you ever notice that chameleon, Dorothy? It was the most fascinating thing I ever saw, fairly hypnotized me."

"Something certainly did!" Dorothy retorted dryly, which was as near as she ever came to saying, "I told you so."

"That's mean, considering that I am so frightfully penitent and all that," Tavia reproached her. "Can't you let bygones be bygones?"

"I am not worrying about what has already happened," Dorothy returned. "It's the future that troubles me."

"Well, I wouldn't worry about Garry, if I were you," advised her chum. "Our friend Gibbons may think he is as innocent as a babe and all that, but you and I know better. If there is any funny business going on, you can bet Garry isn't blind to it."

"But this fellow spoke as if there were others plotting against him, too," said Dorothy, adding bitterly: "It isn't fair, so many against one."

"Garry has friends, too, you know," Tavia reminded her. "Even Stanley Blake admits that. You can make sure Lance Petterby isn't the only one, either. Garry's the kind that makes friends. Imagine hearing Lance's name here in the dining room of the Blenheim Hotel!" she added with a chuckle, as Dorothy's thoughtful silence still continued. "The world is certainly a small place."

"As I believe countless thousands have remarked before you," sighed Dorothy. "Oh, Tavia, I wish you could say something original—think what we ought to do next."

"Why, if you mean about Garry, it seems to me you have already done about all you can do," returned Tavia. "That telegram will warn him to be on his guard."

"If only they had gone on talking for a little

while longer," sighed Dorothy. "I have a feeling that they were about to reveal something that might have been enlightening."

"Well, no use crying about spilled milk," said Tavia, stretching herself out luxuriously on the bed. "If you will excuse me, I think I will take a wink or two of sleep. You would be wise to do the same. We have had, as I need not tell you, a long and tiresome journey."

But Dorothy had no intention of taking her friend's advice. In the first place she was so excited that she could not have slept had she tried. In the second, there was the feeling that she could not afford to waste a precious minute that might bring her nearer to finding Joe or to the discovery of just what danger it was that threatened Garry.

So, while Tavia took her beauty sleep, Dorothy brushed her hair, pulled her hat down tight over the soft mass of it and sallied forth to do a little sleuthing on her own account.

Joe had bought a ticket for Chicago. On such slender information Dorothy undertook the great task of finding him.

She went first to the railroad station and there met her first big disappointment.

If her surmise that Joe had gone to Garry was founded on fact, she realized that his first action after reaching Chicago would be to buy a ticket

for Dugonne, the railroad station nearest to Garry's ranch.

If she could find any of the ticket agents at the station who remembered seeing a lad answering Joe's description—it was a slight enough hope, but all she had—then she and Tavia might carry on the search.

But after a weary round she decided that even this one small hope must perish. No one had noticed a lad of Joe's description and one or two were rather short about saying so, intimating that they were far too busy to be troubled with trivial things.

Turning away, weary and discouraged, deciding to give up the search for that time at least, Dorothy was startled by a touch upon her shoulder and turned quickly to see a young Italian standing beside her.

"Excuse me, Miss," he said, with a boyish eagerness that at once disarmed any annoyance Dorothy might have felt at his presumption. "I heard you talk to the man over there and maybe I can tell you something—not much, but something."

Dorothy's weary face lit up and she regarded the youth pleadingly. She did not speak, but her very silence questioned him.

"I work over there, sell the magazines," he explained, making a graceful gesture toward the

piled-up counter of periodicals near them. "Another man work with me. He tell me one day two, t'ree days ago he saw young feller like young feller you speak about. But I don' know no more nor that."

"Oh, where is he? Let me speak to him!" begged Dorothy frantically, but the young Latin made a gesture eloquent of resignation.

"That feller seeck," he said. "No come to work—must be seeck."

"But tell me his address. I will go to him," cried Dorothy in a fever of impatience.

Again the Italian shrugged resignedly.

"No can do that either," he answered regretfully. "I don' know where he live!"

CHAPTER XV

DISAPPOINTMENT

DOROTHY felt for a moment in the intensity of her disappointment that she could have shaken the smiling Italian. He could look so smug, so resigned, in the face of her own awful anxiety!

This mood lasted for only a moment, however, for she remembered that the lad had at least tried to do her a favor. She even forced a smile to her lips as she thanked him for his meager information.

"Have you any idea when this friend of yours will be back?" she heard herself asking in an unnaturally calm tone.

Again the Italian shook his head helplessly, shrugged.

"I don' know—he don' send no word. He be back mos' any day, though," he continued, brightening. "You stop around here again, eh? Maybe get chance to see him then."

Dorothy nodded and, after thanking him again, continued wearily on her way.

She and Tavia must wait around then for days perhaps until an unknown Italian recovered from

some mysterious sickness—and this when every moment was precious!

Even when this man returned to occupy his place behind the news stand what guarantee had she that the information he had to give was worth anything?

Probably only another false clue, leading them to a dead wall.

And meantime Joe was out in the great world somewhere, miserable and forlorn, almost certainly at the end of his resources financially.

She groaned and was conscious that one or two passersby turned to look at her curiously. At this she came to herself with a start and found that she had been wandering aimlessly outside the station—was in a section utterly strange to her.

She would have felt a trifle panicky had she not remembered that taxicabs were plentiful and that one of them could be counted upon to take her safely to her destination.

She hailed a cab and gave the name of her hotel. It was only a few minutes before she was back there, had paid the taxicab driver and was entering the crowded lobby.

She was crossing swiftly toward the elevator when a familiar figure came within her line of vision and she saw that it was Tavia. A very much disgruntled Tavia, she saw at second glance.

"Well, where have you been, Dorothy Dale?"

asked her chum, with asperity. "It seems that every time I turn my back you take that chance to run off and do something exciting."

"There was nothing exciting about my excursion this afternoon," sighed Dorothy. "I spent a lot of time and trouble and found out—nothing, absolutely nothing."

"Poor Doro," sympathized Tavia, her manner suddenly changing to a more gentle one. "You do look done up. Let's have some tea and you can tell me all about it."

"I should go and fix up a little," protested Dorothy. "I must look a fright."

"You look as sweet as the proverbial summer rose," Tavia reassured her. "Besides, I refuse to be cheated out of my tea. My gracious!" she exclaimed, stopping suddenly before one of the huge pillars in the lounge. "Look who's here!"

On her face was a peculiar expression and Dorothy followed with interest the direction of her gaze. Then she stiffened suddenly and her eyes began to blaze.

Stanley Blake and Gibbons were crossing the lobby, and they were coming directly toward the two girls.

"I don't believe they have seen us," whispered Tavia, who, for once, could see the wisdom of running away. "Can't we slip off toward the elevators?"

"No, stay where you are!" Dorothy's hand closed nervously on her arm. "They have seen us. And—listen Tavia—we must try to be nice to them."

If her chum had gone suddenly mad Tavia could not have looked any more startled. As a matter of fact, she feared for the moment that such was indeed the case.

Dorothy advocating that they "be nice" to a couple of cheap tricksters who were even then conspiring against the success of the man she loved. Impossible! Incredible!

But, impossible and incredible though it seemed, it was undoubtedly true. The two men had come up and addressed the girls with their most ingratiating smiles.

Dorothy, to Tavia's intense wonder and disbelief, coaxed an answering, and utterly adorable, smile to the corners of her mouth.

She chatted with them for several minutes while Tavia gasped inwardly and attempted to hide her intense wonderment from the public gaze.

It was an incredulous, much mystified Tavia, who faced her chum over the teacups a few minutes later.

"For goodness' sake, Doro," she cried, no longer to be restrained. "Have you taken complete leave of your wits?"

"I hope not," returned Dorothy, evidently en-

joying her chum's bewilderment as she poured a cup of tea and sugared it liberally. "It even seems that I might, with more justice, ask that question of you."

"Well, if that isn't adding insult to injury I'd like to know what is!" cried Tavia indignantly. "For two cents I'd shake you soundly, Dorothy Dale, even if this is a public place."

"Don't be foolish, Tavia."

Dorothy Dale leaned forward suddenly, her eyes intent upon her chum's face.

"I should think it would be easy for you to guess the reason of my apparent friendliness for those two scoundrels."

"Easy, old thing," warned Tavia, looking about uneasily at the crowded tables. "'Tisn't quite safe to call names in a crowded place. But go on with your explanation," she urged. "I begin to see light!"

"I wish I did," sighed Dorothy. The momentary animation died out of her face and the old expression of anxiety returned. "I am being decent to those two men in the hope that I may find out something that will be of use to Garry. All's fair in love and war, you see. And this certainly looks like war for Garry."

"Well, you are a great little conspirator!" cried Tavia admiringly. "This promises to be better than many mystery stories I have read. I can

see where we don't have a dull minute from now on."

"I wish I could share your optimism," said Dorothy, and the extreme weariness of her voice prompted Tavia to ask again where she had been and what she had done that afternoon.

Dorothy explained. Tavia was not in the least inclined to take her chum's gloomy view of the situation.

"I should think you would be tickled to death to have turned up any sort of clue, even a half dead one," she said. "Cheer up, Doro, we'll find out the truth at last. Unless," she added, with a ghost of a chuckle, "our friend of the news stand dies of his mysterious ailment, when we may assume that our poor little clue dies with him."

"But meantime, while we are cooling our heels and waiting around for this Italian to turn up, what do you suppose will be happening to Joe?" cried Joe's sister, with anguish in her eyes and voice. "I don't think of it very much, for if I did I'm afraid I couldn't go on."

"Well, you will go on to the end, Dorothy Dale. You always do. And I'll be with you," said Tavia cheerfully. "I will even go so far as to be nice to that villainous looking Gibbons, if you ask me to."

"That would be a test of friendship," protested Dorothy, with a wan little smile. "I wouldn't

ask it of you, Tavia dear. Now, if you are through, suppose we pay for this and go upstairs? I am very tired."

There was nothing more to do that day, but early on the following morning, refreshed by a delicious breakfast in the dining room, the two girls started for the railroad station.

Dorothy had scant hope that her unknown informant would be present, but she could afford to overlook no possible chance.

She was terribly nervous and on edge and once or twice Tavia scolded her sharply for it. A person in Dorothy's condition could not be handled gently, Tavia knew, and again her treatment proved a tonic for her friend.

Inside the station they hurried to the news stand and Dorothy's heart beat wildly as she saw that her young Italian was not alone behind the counter.

At that moment the boy saw Dorothy and Tavia and his eyes brightened.

"I hope you come to-day," he said to Dorothy "I have news for you, maybe."

CHAPTER XVI

DOROTHY HOPES AGAIN

DOROTHY tried vainly to hold in check the wild hope that leaped within her.

"What news?" she repeated as steadily as she could. Then she turned pleadingly to the strange man who stood behind the news stand. "Oh, if you have anything to tell me about my brother, please, please, do!" she cried.

The man looked puzzled till the young Italian explained in his own tongue. Then his face brightened.

"'Bout the boy you want to know, eh?" he asked in broken English. "I tell you all I know —but it is not very much."

"Yes?" pleaded Dorothy in an agony of impatience. She had yet to learn that the Italian could not be hurried in his broken speech and that interruption only impeded his naturally slow progress.

"He seem strange to me, dat boy," he continued, squinting his eyes in a dreamy fashion. "He did not act like a boy his age should act——"

"What was he like—this boy?" interrupted Dorothy again.

Her informant regarded her in pained surprise and, after some difficulty and more interpretation by his young countryman, he made out the meaning of her question.

Then, in his maddeningly deliberate way, he described the lad who had caught his interest—described him down to the very suit of clothes he had been wearing. Dorothy's excitement and impatience increased almost past bearing as she realized that this lad could have been none other than her beloved runaway brother.

"Don't hurry him, Doro," whispered Tavia in her ear, as excited as Dorothy herself. "Can't you see it only confuses him? Let him tell it his own way."

Dorothy nodded and leaned eagerly across the counter toward her informant.

"Did he—did you—speak to this boy?"

The face of the man lit up and he nodded eagerly.

"I feel sorry for him," he explained. "He look so scared and—lonesome."

A little sob broke from Dorothy but she immediately checked it.

"Oh, go on, please go on!" she begged. "What did you say to him?"

"I ask him if he is all alone," the Italian

responded, more readily than he had yet done. "He say, yes, all alone an' he want to go to Desert City."

The two girls started and stared at each other.

"What did I tell you?" cried Dorothy radiantly, then immediately turned back to the man. "What did he do then? Please tell me quickly," she begged.

"I tol' him nearest station to Desert City, Dugonne," he paused and regarded the girls beamingly as though proud of his knowledge, and in spite of Tavia's warning pressure on her arm Dorothy could not stand the delay.

"Of course we know that," she said. "Please go on!"

"He say he no have money to buy ticket——"

Tavia gave a little exclamation of pity and this time it was Dorothy who held up her hand for silence.

"I say I lend him ten cents——"

"Ten cents!" repeated Tavia hysterically. "But ten cents wouldn't take him ten miles——"

"But he have all the rest himself," explained the Italian, with the air of one who has told the answer to a clever riddle. "All he need more than he got, ten cents. I give him."

"It was more than kind of you," cried Dorothy gratefully. "I can give you the ten cents, but I can never repay your kindness."

With the words she got out her purse and from it took some money which she extended toward Joe's benefactor. He seemed reluctant at first to take it, but, upon Dorothy's insistence, overcame his scruples.

They had turned away after repeated expressions of thanks when suddenly Dorothy broke away from Tavia and ran back again.

"There is just one more thing I should like to ask you," she said breathlessly. "Do you know whether my brother actually bought a ticket to Dugonne as he intended to?"

The Italian shook his head and shrugged his shoulders in that exaggerated gesture of regret.

"I cannot tell, Miss. He went off in the crowd. I never see him again."

So Dorothy had to be content with the information she had. As a matter of fact, she was more than satisfied. She was jubilant.

Not only had her suspicions concerning Joe's intention proved correct, but now she had some definite clue to work on. No more suspense, no more delay. They would take the very next train to Dugonne.

Dorothy's heart bounded with relief—and another feeling. For at Desert City she would see Garry again. And it would be good to see Garry!

"Well, you have gone and done it this time," Tavia greeted her jubilantly. "I am here to tell

the world you are some sleuth, Dorothy Dale. You certainly have brought home the bacon."

"Tavia, such slang!" cried Dorothy, but she almost sang the words. "I wish you could sing my praises in more ladylike terms."

"You should worry as long as they get sung!" retorted the light-hearted Tavia. "I suppose Dugonne is our next stop," she added, looking at Dorothy with dancing eyes.

"The Blenheim," corrected Dorothy, with a shake of her head. "We must at least take time to get our grips and pay the hotel bill."

"Thus is adventure always spoiled by such sordid things," sighed Tavia. "But if we must we must."

Upon reaching the hotel they checked out immediately and, by consulting a time-table, found that they could get a train for Dugonne in half an hour.

"Here's luck," said Tavia. "No painful waiting around while you wonder what to do."

"We do seem to be running in luck to-day," replied Dorothy. "I have an absurd desire to knock wood every few minutes for fear it will desert us," she admitted.

"The wood?" giggled Tavia.

"The luck, you silly," retorted Dorothy, adding with a significant glance at Tavia's head

under the saucy small hat: "And I wouldn't have to look very far for the wood at that!"

"You can be cruel when you wish, Doro. Though no one would guess it to look at you."

The train started on time and they found to their further joy that it was possible even at this last moment to engage berths in the Pullman.

They found themselves comfortably settled, their baggage stowed away, and the train on its way in a miraculously short time.

"Thank goodness we managed to avoid saying a fond farewell to your friend Stanley Blake and his companion."

"My friend, indeed!" Dorothy retorted indignantly. "I'd like to know how you get that way, Tavia Travers!"

"Such terrible slang," murmured Tavia incorrigibly.

"Who was it, I would like to know, who encouraged those two, anyway—I mean at first?"

"Well, you ought to be grateful to me," returned Tavia, opening her big eyes. "If I hadn't encouraged them, as you call it, we might never have found out their deep dark secret. Then where would your precious Garry be, I'd like to know?"

Dorothy threw up her hands and gave in.

"No use. You are absolutely hopeless," she cried, and Tavia grinned wickedly.

"Have some candy?" she asked, extending the box she had been thoughtful enough to buy at the station, hoping thus to change the subject. And she was successful, for who can find fault with a person when benefiting by her generosity?

"I feel as though I should have sent a telegram to Garry, warning him of Joe's descent upon him," Dorothy said, after awhile. "It would be rather a shock if Joe walked in on him unannounced."

"But then if Joe doesn't appear per schedule Garry would be worried and so would you," Tavia pointed out. "No, Doro dear, I think you have done wisely to let well enough alone. It seems to me we have done all we can do for the present."

Almost before they knew it came the second call for lunch, and the girls rose to go to the dining car.

They had to pass through several cars to reach the diner, and at the next to the last Tavia stopped short, almost upsetting Dorothy, who followed close behind her.

"Dorothy!" she said in a queer voice. "Do you see what I see?"

CHAPTER XVII

SOME RASCALS REAPPEAR

DOROTHY'S eyes followed the direction of Tavia's momentarily petrified stare and she suddenly and sharply drew in her breath. There seated side by side with their heads close together were Stanley Blake and the small black-eyed man whom he had called Gibbons.

Dorothy felt extremely uncomfortable, but she retained her presence of mind sufficiently to urge Tavia to go on as quickly as possible.

Tavia was quick to take the hint and, pretending they did not see the two men and hoping that the latter would not notice them, they hurried by. With relief they found themselves a moment later safe and unrecognized in the dining car.

There was a short line of passengers awaiting admission to the tables and Dorothy was greatly relieved when she and Tavia were finally beckoned to places at the front of the car.

Facing each other across the table, their eyes spoke volumes but their tongues were tied by the fact that they were not alone at the table, at

which were already eating two men in loud, checked suits and flashy neckties.

Dorothy, facing the door of the dining car, watched it constantly in apprehension lest the two men appear. Tavia, watching the direction of her glance, understood her thought and spoke reassuringly.

"I don't imagine there is any danger of meeting them here now, Doro," she said. "You remember they were always the first in the dining car on the way out and probably their habits haven't changed much since then."

Dorothy nodded.

"Lucky for us we waited until the second call," she said.

After that they spoke only of trivial things until the two men at their table, traveling salesmen, by their conversation, got up and lumbered fatly off.

Tavia found herself wondering with an inward chuckle why men who indulged a passion for checked suits almost invariably were fat.

An anxious question from Dorothy brought her back to consideration of the immediate problem confronting them.

"Do you think they are going to Desert City?" asked Dorothy in a voice so low it could hardly be heard above the pounding of the train.

"I shouldn't wonder if that were their des-

tination, Doro mia," agreed Tavia reluctantly. "Having mentioned Garry's ranch and being now bound in the general direction of Colorado and Desert City, it seems only fair to assume that their destination is more or less identical with ours."

"If I could only find out what they are up to!" cried Dorothy, adding, as her pretty mouth set itself firmly: "And I intend to find out, too, before I get through with those rascals."

"I have a shorter and uglier word for them," said Tavia. Then she leaned across the table toward her chum and asked with interest: "This begins to sound thrilling, Doro, do you mind telling an old friend—if not a trusted one—when and how you intend to start in the business of mind reading?"

"I am sure I don't know!" admitted Dorothy, as she stared absently at her practically untouched plate. "It is one thing to determine on an action and quite another to carry it out."

"There speaks great wisdom," gibed Tavia, in good-natured raillery, adding with genuine concern as her eyes also focused upon Dorothy's plate of untouched food: "But why don't you eat, Doro? One must, you know, to live——"

Quite suddenly Dorothy's eyes filled with tears and her lip quivered. Tavia looked astonished and alarmed.

"Now what have I done?" she cried. "If I said anyhing——"

"Oh, it isn't you," Dorothy interrupted. "I was thinking of Joe." She stared across at her chum with tragic eyes. "Tavia, have you stopped to think how Joe is going to—to—eat?"

"Why, with his mouth I —" Tavia began in her usual flippant tone, then stopped short, staring at her chum.

"One doesn't eat these days unless he pays for what he gets," said Dorothy bitterly.

"And Joe spent his last cent for railroad fare," Tavia said, in a small voice.

"Exactly," retorted Dorothy. She gave a comprehensive sweep of her hand toward the tempting contents of her plate. "Then with that thought in mind, do you wonder that food chokes me?"

"Poor Doro!" said Tavia softly. "You surely have more than your share of trouble just now. But you had better eat, dear," she added very gently. "It won't do Joe any good for you to starve yourself, you know. You are going to need all your strength for the business of finding the poor foolish lad."

Dorothy, practical and sensible as always, saw the wisdom of this and forced down about half of her lunch and hastily swallowed a glass of milk.

"I hate to go through that car again," she confided to her chum, when there was no further excuse for lingering.

"So do I," confessed Tavia. "However, I think the waiter is of a mercenary turn of mind. He hovereth over the check like a hungry hawk."

"Your description is picturesque, if a trifle strained," murmured Dorothy, as she motioned to the waiter and took out her pocketbook. "Your imagination does terrible things to you, Tavia."

But in her heart she was mutely grateful that Tavia had been created as she was with an unquenchable sense of humor and scant reverence for solemn things. To her, trouble was merely a cloud before the sun that would presently pass and leave the day brighter than ever. And one had the feeling that if the sun did not come out quickly enough to suit her, Tavia would find a way to hurry it!

On the way through their car Tavia was quick to notice that Dorothy made no attempt to avoid the gaze of the two men; in fact, seemed rather to court it. Tavia had a moment of intense admiration for her chum's ability as an actress. She would never have suspected it of Dorothy, the sensible, practical and straightforward.

The handsome eyes of Stanley Blake discovered them immediately and he rose with what should have been flattering alacrity.

Tavia noticed that his pleasure was for Dorothy and knew what she had suspected from the beginning, that her chum had been the real object of his admiration.

Gibbons did not seem quite so pleased to see them. Tavia noticed that his eyes had narrowed in a surly and suspicious manner.

Dorothy answered quite sweetly and pleasantly Blake's interested questions concerning the number of their reservation, and after a moment of light and amiable conversation, the two girls passed on, leaving the men to stare after them, one with admiration, the other with suspicion.

"Well, now you've gone and done it," said Tavia, looking at her chum with dancing eyes when they regained their seat. "You couldn't possibly snub our gay fellow travelers after that lusciously friendly greeting."

"I don't want to—just yet," returned Dorothy significantly.

At the next station the train stopped for a few minutes to take on coal and water and Dorothy took this opportunity to send a second telegram to Garry.

In this she told him of the presence of the two men on the same train with her and Tavia and their probable destination.

She told him also of her anxiety concerning Joe and begged him to watch out for the lad,

saying that he had undoubtedly gone out to join him, Garry, at Desert City by way of Dugonne.

Somehow, after sending this telegram, she felt easier in her mind concerning Joe. Provided that the lad reached Dugonne in safety Garry could be depended upon to *keep* him in safety until she could get to him.

As the train moved on again, Tavia settled back in her seat contentedly and regarded the flying landscape with dreamy anticipation.

In her own mind Tavia had decided that Joe was either already safe with Garry or soon would be, and she was preparing to enjoy the rest of the trip.

"It will be great to see Desert City and a ranch again," she said, putting some of her thoughts into words for Dorothy's benefit. "I wonder if it will all look the same as it did when we left it, Doro."

"A great deal better, probably," said Dorothy, rousing herself from a troubled reverie. "With Lost River to solve the irrigation problem all the ranchland in the vicinity of our ranch and Garry's should have benefited a great deal. I shouldn't wonder if we should see some wonderful changes, Tavia."

"I reckon that mining gang were sore when they couldn't get Lost River for their own

schemes," chuckled Tavia. "Do you remember Philo Marsh?"

"Do I remember him!" repeated Dorothy, with a shiver. "You might better ask me if I can ever forget him!"

"Oh, well, he wasn't so bad," said Tavia, still chuckling. "He certainly kept our vacation from being a dull one."

The girls were recalling incidents of their first memorable trip to Desert City and the Hardin ranch. The ranch had been willed jointly to Major Dale and Dorothy's Aunt Winnie White by Colonel Hardin, an old friend of the Major's.

It had been Colonel Hardin's wish that Lost River, a stream which had its origin on the Hardin ranch and which, after flowing for a short distance above ground, disappeared abruptly into the earth and continued for some distance underground, be diverted for the good of the farm- and ranchlands in the vicinity.

An influential group of miners represented secretly by a lawyer of shady reputation, the Philo Marsh spoken of by Tavia, had nursed quite different plans in connection with Lost River. They needed the stream in their mining operations and were determined to get it.

The Major and Mrs. White, however, were quite as determined to act according to the wishes of Colonel Hardin. They successfully combated

more than one attempt by the mine owners to get possession of the river, but it remained for the young folks, Dorothy, Tavia and the two White boys and a young Mexican girl on the ranch, to outwit the final plot of the unscrupulous men.

Lost River had consequently gone to the ranch-lands in the vicinity as Colonel Hardin had wished and there had followed a period of rare contentment and prosperity for the farmers.

Garry Knapp's land adjoined the Hardin estate and had been left to the young Westerner by the will of his uncle, Terry Knapp.

The latter was an irascible, though kind-hearted, old fellow who had quarreled with his nephew on a point of ethics and had promptly disinherited him. Consequently, Garry was very much surprised and affected to find that his Uncle Terry had repented of his harshness and on his death bed had left the old Knapp ranch to him.

Naturally, Garry had benefited, as had his neighbors, by the diversion of Lost River and there had seemed until lately nothing in the path of his ambition to raise the finest wheat crop in all that productive country.

Of course Garry had had enemies, Dorothy knew that. There were those who envied him his good fortune and who would willingly have taken the Knapp ranch away from him.

With the help of Bob Douglas, Terry's foreman while he lived and now as devotedly Garry's, the young ranchman had been able to laugh at these attempts.

But now it looked to Dorothy as though something more serious than ever was afoot to rob Garry of the fruits of victory, and she was anxious.

"Wake up, Doro darling," she heard Tavia hiss excitedly. "The villains approach. Now is your opportunity to prove yourself a great melodramatic actress if not worse."

CHAPTER XVIII

PLAYING A PART

DOROTHY braced up mentally and prepared for the encounter.

Stanley Blake was coming toward them down the aisle with Gibbons following close at his heels like a squat little tug in the wake of a graceful steamboat.

Tavia's eyes danced as she watched them. She was evidently prepared to enjoy herself thoroughly. To see her outspoken Dorothy Dale play a part was a novelty and a most amusing one.

"Like going to a play, only lots better," was her unspoken thought. "For this, Tavia Travers, is real drama. True to life, if not truer."

But Dorothy was in quite a different mood. It was hard for her to act a part and she hated it. If she were forced to do such a thing for any one but Garry——

She closed here eyes for a moment and thought hard of Garry. When she opened them she looked straight into the handsome eyes of "Cal," *alias* Stanley Blake, and smiled sweetly.

The latter was armed with two huge candy boxes and Dorothy accepted one of these while she longed to throw it to the floor. She decided hastily that she would get rid of it as soon as the men had returned to their own car.

It was easy to see that Tavia had no such scruples. She had already untied the violet ribbon that surrounded a box of an equally violet—Tavia afterwards pronounced it "violent"—hue, and, with smiling hospitality, was passing it around.

They talked for a while about impersonal things until Dorothy managed deftly and with apparent inadvertence to insert the information that she and her chum were bound for Desert City.

Stanley Blake immediately showed great pleasure, imparting the information that, by a strange coincidence, his destination also was Desert City.

It was the unpleasant-faced Gibbons that inquired with apparent guilelessness whether they had friends at Desert City, and it was here also that Dorothy displayed tact and discretion.

She responded with the truth about her pursuit of Joe and went into details with such candor—as, indeed, why should she not, seeing that she was telling the truth, even if it was not all the truth?—that even the inclined-to-be-skeptical Gibbons seemed impressed.

It ended in their assuring her of their personal aid in the search for her lost brother. Dorothy thanked them and in a few minutes they took their leave, Blake being fairly dragged along by the insistent Gibbons.

Tavia guessed that the mind of the last-named gentleman was concentrated upon the dining car from which could momentarily be expected the first call to dinner, and in this guess she came very near the truth.

"Well done, Doro!" Tavia exclaimed as her chum leaned back wearily in a corner of her seat. "You pulled the wool over their eyes with rare skill. The next thing you know our handsome Cal will be baring his secret thoughts to you."

"Not while that other fellow, Gibbons, is around," said Dorothy ruefully. "He hasn't much brains, but he has more than Stanley Blake, or whatever his real name is. Didn't you notice once or twice how Gibbons caught Blake up when he was about to divulge some secret?"

"Did I notice?" repeated Tavia reproachfully. "My dear, do you think I was born yesterday? And now," she added gleefully, "you have given me an inkling why I was thrust into this cruel world, Doro Dale. I believe I was born for this moment!"

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"Impossible to avoid it, my dear," retorted

Tavia. "Now listen while I unfold to you my part in this drama."

And so it came to pass that an ugly-faced individual named Gibbons came to the conclusion that he was irresistible to the fair sex, or at least to one representative member of it named Tavia Travers.

He was bewildered and fascinated, albeit still faintly suspicious. But his vanity was touched, and that is fatal to a man—especially to a man of the Gibbons stamp. Before they arrived at Dugonne the next day he was completely enslaved and suspicion had been almost completely lulled to rest.

As Tavia herself later confided to Dorothy, she had seldom, if ever, worked so hard in her life, for Gibbons was not the type of man a girl naturally takes to, especially a girl of discrimination like Tavia.

"Now, your part was the easy one," she added, at which Dorothy looked at her pityingly.

"If you think so, you should have tried it!" was all she said. However, the fact remains that, in spite of all their efforts, the girls found out very little concerning the plot involving Garry at which in the hotel dining room these men had hinted.

Dorothy, though spending many hours in the society of Stanley Blake, never dared to lead

directly up to the subject and the man avoided all reference to his present business in Desert City with a skill that was baffling.

Only once under the stimulus of a good meal and Dorothy's smiles did he become talkative.

"There are some young fellows out here in the West who expect to make a fortune when they really haven't got the least idea how to go about it," he began, and paused, looking over at Dorothy.

The girl said nothing, but evidently he found her silence encouraging for his mood became more expansive as he warmed up to his discourse.

"They expect to strike gold the first thing, or raise a spanking crop of wheat without having, you might say, a bit of experience. Serves their conceit right when some of them get left."

"Do many of them get left?" asked Dorothy softly, hoping that her face expressed the right degree of indifference.

"A right smart lot of them do, I reckon," he responded, with a chuckle. "I know one young fellow right now who's due for a large, hard fall if he don't keep his eyes pretty spry about him."

Dorothy started nervously and covered her slip by reaching for a chocolate from Tavia's candy box. Tavia, by the way, was at that moment sparkling for the benefit of a bewildered

but appreciative Gibbons on the observation platform.

Dorothy hoped Tavia would continue to sparkle for a few moments more. She felt that she was on the verge of a real discovery.

So she asked, disguising her eagerness behind a yawn of apparently complete boredom:

"Is this young fellow you speak of a miner or is he trying to get rich raising wheat?"

"Trying! Trying is right!" snorted the other, and Dorothy surprised an extremely ugly look in his eyes. "Why, he isn't sure he even owns the land for his wheat to grow on!"

"The title not clear?" asked the girl, in a quiet voice.

"Sometimes titles have flaws in 'em, sometimes it's old men's wills that are not clear," answered the fellow absently.

Dorothy uttered a startled exclamation and the man glanced at her swiftly. Perhaps it was the look in her eyes or some latent stirrings of caution, but at any rate he changed the subject, speaking aimlessly of the weather.

"Looks like we are running into a rain storm," he remarked, adding, idly: "Good thing for wheat, anyway."

Dorothy knew that there was no chance of learning anything further concerning Garry and,

as they were rapidly reaching Dugonne, the nearest station to the Hardin ranch, she felt that her opportunity was almost at an end.

At any rate, she had found out one thing.

"I wonder," she thought wearily as Blake left her and sauntered in the direction of the smoking car, "if there can be any truth in what he hinted. But of course there can't be. Garry ought to know whether he owns his ranch or not. Oh, how I hate that Stanley Blake!"

CHAPTER XIX

AN OLD FRIEND

LATER Dorothy related the details of this conversation to Tavia, and even that sanguine one could find little of use in it.

"It seems to leave us just about where we were before," she commented. "Never mind, honey, we shall soon be in Desert City, and, once on the ground, I reckon we'll find ourselves in possession of more unpleasant facts than we need or want."

"How comforting you are," complained Dorothy, as she turned restlessly in the velvet-covered seat. "I am horribly nervous, Tavia. Suppose Joe hasn't reached Desert City! Suppose he took the wrong train or something! So many things may happen to a boy traveling all alone. Remember, he didn't even have money to buy himself food!"

"Now you stop worrying, Doro Doodlekins." Tavia's arms had circled her chum in a comforting embrace. "If that telegram has reached Garry, as of course it has, I'll guarantee he has Joe as safe as a bug in a rug by this time."

A little sound broke from Dorothy that was

more sob than laugh, but she tried to turn it into a laugh as she answered Tavia's reassurance with a wistful:

"That does sound wonderful, Tavia. If it is only true!"

"Of course it's true. Did you ever know me to tell a fib?" retorted Tavia, and wished in her heart that she was as certain as her words sounded.

Then came their arrival at Dugonne and the embarrassment and indecision of the two girls as to just how they were to get rid of their two acquaintances now that they had reached their destination.

"I imagine we won't have to worry about it much," Dorothy remarked shrewdly. "When they find that our destination is the Hardin ranch and that I am engaged to Garry Knapp whose property adjoins the Hardin ranch, they probably will keep their distance from us."

"That's all right after they learn," assented Tavia. "What I was worrying about was the meantime."

As it happened, they were spared the embarrassment of sending Blake and Gibbons about their business by the sudden and unexpected appearance at the station of an old friend of theirs, or rather, of Tavia's.

The girls had descended to the platform hoping that, since Blake and Gibbons were almost at

the other end of the train, they would be able to get away before the men came up to them.

Dorothy searched with eager eyes the faces of those who had gathered to meet the train, expecting confidently to see Garry.

Had she not wired him of her impending arrival and of the very time of her arrival? And of course Garry would be there, eagerly looking for her, as she was for him.

But Garry was not there. Dorothy realized this with incredulity. Garry was not there!

Then suddenly her incredulity was engulfed by a terrible apprehension. If Garry was not there, there could be only one reason. Garry could not come! Something had happened to him!

"Well, that young Knapp fellow seems to be conspicuous by his absence," Tavia observed flippantly. "Guess we'd better get a bus, Doro, and ride up to the Hardin ranch in style. Horrors, here come those awful men!"

Dorothy gave a quick glance up the platform and saw that Blake and Gibbons were bearing rapidly down upon them. Something must be done right away. They couldn't stand there gaping like Eastern "tenderfoots."

It was at this critical moment that Tavia discovered her old friend.

"Lance! Lance Petterby!" she called, literally dragging Dorothy along by the hand to the far

end of the station where stood a dilapidated Ford car. "Well, if this isn't the greatest luck ever!"

The broad-hatted young fellow behind the wheel of the battered car looked bewildered for a moment. Then he smiled broadly and, with a sweeping gesture, removed his sombrero.

The next moment he had leaped to the ground, his tanned, good-looking face alight with smiles.

"Well, if it ain't Miss Tavia and Miss Dorothy!" he cried. "Jerusha Juniper, but it's good to see you both!"

The familiar exclamation brought a smile from both the girls, for it was the phrase with which Lance greeted every emergency of his life.

"What can I do for you?" asked Lance, as he looked about at the fast-diminishing throng around the station. "No one to meet you, eh?" He was surprised, for he had heard of Garry Knapp's engagement to Dorothy.

"Not a soul," agreed Tavia. Lance stepped aside and she saw with embarrassment that he was not alone in his ancient equipage. "Oh," she cried, "we didn't know you had any one with you."

"'Tain't no one, only my wife," said Lance, with a fond possessive smile. "Ladies, meet Mrs. Petterby, and a finer, prettier wife you wouldn't meet nowheres."

The plump young person thus described smiled genially and the girls saw that she was very pretty

indeed and of the type generally described as "wholesome."

"Lance is always ridiculous, but most so when describin' me," she said, in a pleasant drawl. "Do be still, Octavia Susan!"

Tavia started, and was very much taken aback until she saw that this remark was not addressed to her but to the small infant in the arms of Susan Petterby.

Lance immediately captured the infant, bringing it forward for closer inspection by the laughing girls.

"Octavia Susan Petterby was a pretty little thing, resembling closely her blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked mother.

"My godchild!" exclaimed Tavia dramatically. She stretched out her arms, intending to clasp the baby in a warm embrace, that seeming the right and proper thing to do with one's godchild. But she got no further than the gesture, for Octavia Susan suddenly shut her eyes and opened her mouth and let out a wail that would have daunted a more phlegmatic person that Tavia.

Even Lance seemed to be slightly apprehensive, for he restored the infant to its mother's arms with marked alacrity.

"She doesn't like me!" cried Tavia, in mock chagrin, adding, with a chuckle: "I don't believe she even knows I'm her godmother."

"There's a heap she's got to learn yet, Miss Tavia," Lance agreed, with a grin. "And probably that's one of them. But say, Miss Dale," he added, turning to Dorothy, "I suppose you are hankerin' to get out to the Hardin ranch. If you don't mind hittin' the high spots in the old flivver, me and the wife will have you out there in a jiffy. Funny nobody came to meet you," he added, as the girls accepted with thanks and climbed into the tonneau of the car.

The reiteration irritated Dorothy and she was about to reply rather sharply when she thought suddenly of the two men, Blake and Gibbons, who had been hurrying to meet them when Tavia spied Lance Petterby and his car.

Her quick glance scanned the platform, but she saw they had gone. Seeing her and Tavia with Lance, they had probably thought it advisable to go away quickly.

"By the way, Miss Dale," Lance asked in his drawling tones, "I meant to ask you when I first saw you. Was you lookin' for your brother Joe?"

CHAPTER XX

REAL NEWS AT LAST

"Was you lookin' for your brother Joe?"

For the moment the casualness of that question robbed Dorothy of her power of speech. It was Tavia who answered for her.

"Looking for him!" she repeated. "I should say we were! Half across the continent, and no luck yet."

"Have you seen him, Lance?" Dorothy's voice was breathless and pleading and Lance had turned in his seat to look at her as he drove the Ford over the bumpy road.

"I certainly did! And he wasn't keepin' no good company, either." There was hearty disapproval in the last part of this observation, but Dorothy was too interested in the first part to notice.

"Did he look well, Lance?" she cried.

"Well, as to that, I can't hardly say," returned the cowboy, with maddening deliberation. "Seein' as I didn't see him 'cept in passin', as you might say."

"Where was he going?" cried Dorothy, almost

frantic with suspense. "At least you can tell me that, can't you?"

"Don't be so slow and palaverin'," Susan Petterby adjured her husband. "You can be the most aggravatin' person when you wants to, Lance Petterby. Takin' so long to think and puttin' a body off so. Can't you see the young lady is worried nigh to death?"

"Guess that's so, though you're always the one for seein' things, Sue," said Lance penitently. "Your brother Joe was going to Garry Knapp's ranch when I saw him, Miss Dale."

"Oh, then everything is all right," cried Dorothy, with a great sigh of relief. "Once he gets to Garry all my worries will be over."

"Yes, if we was only sure he got where he was goin'," said Lance gloomily, adding hastily in response to his wife's sharp nudge in the ribs: "Though it's more than likely he got there all right, anyway."

In spite of his clumsy attempt to cover a slip of the tongue, the mischief had been done. Fear leaped into Dorothy's heart again as she said quietly:

"Please tell me what you meant by that, Lance. Please don't try to keep anything from me."

"Well," complied Lance reluctantly, always keeping an eye on his plump and pretty wife, "I sure don't mean to scare you, Miss Dorothy, be-

cause, as I said before, everything is probably all right. But the lad was in company with a fellow that ain't no friend of Garry's, nor yet of any decent man's in these parts. You may be sure I didn't trust him, and when I heard who the lad was I did my best to get him to go with me."

"And he wouldn't?" interposed Dorothy swiftly and in surprise.

Lance shook his head.

"Larrimer—that's the man he was with—didn't give him much chance. Whisked him off almost before I had finished speakin'. Ain't got no manners, that guy ain't." He chuckled reminiscently, but Dorothy was very far from seeing any joke in what he had said.

"But I don't understand, Lance," she said, bewildered. "Why was my brother—why was Joe in the company of this man?"

"Picked him up, probably, Miss Dale," returned Lance, his voice softening to a tone of sympathy. "The boy was probably hungry——"

"Probably he was!" Dorothy interrupted, with a half sob.

"When I first saw them they was comin' out of Hicks' chop house and the lad was wipin' his mouth on his handkerchief. After that your brother Joe probably thought Larrimer was a mighty slick feller—which he is," the cowboy added, with another of his slow chuckles.

"Who is Larrimer, if you don't mind relieving our curiosity?" asked Tavia who, up to this time, had been too interested in the conversation to join it. "You needn't keep all your jokes to yourself, Lance."

"He ain't no joke, Larrimer ain't," retorted Lance, suddenly grim. "He's the meanest guy that ever busted an honest broncho. Yes, ma'am, Larrimer is worse than the plague, him and his swell pals, Stiffbold and Lightly."

"Stiffbold and Lightly," repeated Dorothy thoughtfully, then added, with another swift rush of apprehension. "Oh, those are the two men who have been making so much trouble for Garry. After his land—and everything."

"You said it, Miss Dale. His land and everything," returned Lance, his tone still grim. "First they was all for tryin' to prove that Garry ain't got no land—which was about the same as tellin' Garry he ain't been born. Then, when all the law sharpers they got on their string couldn't prove nothin' to nobody's satisfaction—'ceptin' maybe Larrimer's—they tried drivin' Garry to sell."

"Oh!" gasped Dorothy. "As if he would!"

"That's just it, Miss Dale," agreed Lance Petterby approvingly. "Garry would just as likely sell his right arm off'n him as to part with any of his land. And after that they tried differ-

ent tactics, and I must say for them that they've been pretty thorough—haven't left one little stone unturned, as you might say."

Susan Petterby again nudged her husband as though to tell him he had gone far enough. But Dorothy's insistence was not to be denied.

"What did they do, Lance? Please tell me. I will find out from Garry, anyway, when I see him. So you might as well."

"Well, I ain't no diplomat," said Lance ruefully. "What with Sue here cavin' in my ribs every time I open my mouth and with Miss Dale clamorin' for information——"

"Please let him tell me, Mrs. Petterby," coaxed Dorothy, while Tavia giggled delightedly. "I've known all along that Garry was having a good deal of trouble—he told me that himself. So really, you see, Lance is only filling in the details."

"Well, when he gets to talkin' there generally ain't no stoppin' him," the young wife warned amiably. "But as long as you don't mind——"

Lance took advantage of this permission to launch immediately into a rambling account of the unremitting persecution Garry Knapp had suffered ever since he came into possession of his Uncle Terry Knapp's property.

When he had finished Dorothy's cheeks were hot and in her heart was a tremendous indigna-

tion. And the thought of Joe in company with the despicable Larrimer was maddening.

"How did you know Joe was going to Garry's ranch when you met him with Larrimer?" she asked suddenly.

"The lad told me himself," said Lance. "And when he did, Larrimer gave him a look that was as full of p'ison as a rattlesnake's bite. Only he took great care the boy didn't see it."

"But if you knew Joe was in danger, why didn't you take him away—why didn't you make that horrible man give him up?" cried Dorothy, half wild with anxiety. "Then you could have taken him to Garry yourself."

"I didn't know he was in danger, Miss Dale. I was only guessin'," the Westerner reminded her gently. "And probably my guess was dead wrong at that. Probably Larrimer didn't have no intention to do nothin' but what he said. It's dollars to doughnuts your brother Joe is safe and snug at the Knapp ranch this minute."

"And that's the reason I didn't want you to go fillin' her head with unpleasant thoughts, Lance Petterby," said Sue, with a vehemence that was rather startling coming from so placid and amiable a person. "I do believe you like to be scarin' people."

"Now, you ain't got no call to talk thataway, little hon," Lance complained gently. "I ain't

never scared you none, have I? Always been kind and gentle, ain't I?"

"That all depends on what you call kind and gentle," retorted young Mrs. Petterby, but the girls saw that her eyes were very soft as she looked at Lance.

Tavia's young namesake chose that moment to let out a pathetic wail and Tavia reached out her arms impulsively.

"Do let me take her," she begged. "You must be tired carrying her so far, and I really don't believe she will hate me so much if she takes a longer look."

The young woman surrendered her burden with obvious relief.

"She's a right bouncin' young un," she sighed, but there was a world of pride beneath the complaint. "You would think she was nigh on a year old instead of only a few months."

The infant almost immediately surrendered to her godmother's blandishments and in no time at all the two were the best of chums.

Dorothy tried to take an interest in the baby, but she could not keep her anxious thoughts from Garry and Joe.

Had Joe reached the Knapp ranch in safety? Why had not Garry come to meet the train? What influence had that man Larrimer over Joe?

"Lance," she said, suddenly, "did you see those

two men at the station—the two who got off the train at the same time Tavia and I did?"

"The tall guy and the little feller?" queried Lance. "You just better believe I did. Those two was what me and Sue was lookin' for. We had advance information that they was due on this train, but we had a hankerin' to make sure."

"Who are they?" asked Dorothy, while Tavia stopped playing with Octavia Susan to listen.

CHAPTER XXI

TWO SCOUNDRELS

"WHO? Them?" asked Lance, in apparent surprise at the question. "Why, the names of those two rogues is mighty unpopular words round this section. Reckoned you knew who they was. They was the two I been tellin' you about —pals of Larrimer's."

"Not——" began Dorothy.

Lance nodded, jerking the little car to the middle of the road as they bounced over a particularly uneven spot in the trail that threatened to send them into a ditch by the roadside.

"Stiffbold and Lightly. You got them right the first time, ma'am."

"Oh, isn't this perfectly thrilling?" cried Tavia delightedly. "At every turn in the road the plot thickens!"

"But they told us their names were Blake and Gibbons!" cried Dorothy, leaning forward in her seat while Lance, crouched behind the wheel, turned half-way around the better to hear her.

This position undoubtedly imperiled the safety of the car and its passengers. It also greatly

alarmed the plump and rosy Mrs. Petterby, who had not yet outgrown her fear of the car nor developed the absolute faith in her husband's ability to "drive with one hand and the other tied behind him" that Lance declared he deserved.

However, she kept silent, merely gripping the edge of the seat with two plump hands and praying for the best.

"Very likely they did, Miss Dorothy," returned Lance, in response to Dorothy's declaration that, aboard the train, the names of her traveling companions had been given as Blake and Gibbons. "Reckon they have a different set of names for every town they stay in. I imagine their moves are many and devious and they are not always keen on havin' them followed up."

"I wonder what they were doing in Chicago," said Dorothy, speaking her thought aloud. At her words Lance immediately, as Tavia described it, "pricked up his ears."

"Oh, then they was in Chicago?" he said, whistling softly. "Kind of glad to know that, all things considered. Ain't no other information you'd like to give me, is there, ma'am?"

Whereupon Dorothy immediately launched into a detailed account of their meeting with the two men and of the startling, though unsatisfactory, conversation which she and Tavia had acci-

dentally overheard in the dining room of the Chicago hotel.

Lance evinced great interest, especially in the fact that Garry's name had been mentioned.

"Why should these scoundrels especially pick on Garry?" asked Tavia suddenly. "Isn't there anybody besides Garry around here that has something they want?"

"There ain't nobody around here that has something that they don't want to get it away from them, Miss Tavia," rejoined Lance, with his grim chuckle.

"Then why must they pick on Garry? More than the rest, I mean?" persisted Tavia.

Lance shrugged his shoulders eloquently.

"Because Garry Knapp happens to have the largest and most succulent wheat land anywhere around here," he said. "Lightly and Stiffbold and those fellers believe in hookin' the big fish first. Then they can come after us little ones."

"Do you think Garry is in any real danger?" asked Dorothy slowly. "Any personal danger, I mean?"

Lance shook his head emphatically.

"Now don't you go worryin' about that, at all, Miss Dorothy," he said. "These fellers are sneakin' and mean. But that's just it—they ain't out-an'-outers. They always tries to play just within the law, or as near to the edge of it as

they can. That's why they haven't been caught long ago and sent to jail like they deserve. There ain't never been anything that you could really hang on them—any proof, if you get what I mean.

"No, they wouldn't dare do nothin' to Garry except pester the life out of the lad in hopes he'll be glad to sell. If they try any dirty work—well, Garry Knapp has plenty of friends to punish the offenders!"

"I know that," said Dorothy softly. Then she added, in a sudden rush of feeling for this crude and ingenuous young ranchman with the big heart and devoted attachment to Garry: "And Garry—and I—Lance, appreciate your friendship."

"Oh, I ain't the only friend he's got, not by a long shot," protested the young fellow, embarrassed, as always in the presence of any genuine emotion. "We're watching those sharpers, you can bet."

"With the eyes of a hawk," murmured Tavia, and Lance Petterby grinned.

"You always was great at expressin' things, Miss Tavia," he said.

"But what I can't understand," said Dorothy, as though thinking her thoughts aloud, "is why Garry did not come to the station."

She caught the quick glance that Lance flung at her over his shoulder and could have bitten her

tongue out for the admission. Only then did she realize the extent of the hurt Garry had inflicted by his neglect.

"I was wonderin' that same thing myself, ma'am," Lance remarked in his gentle drawl. "Reckoned you might have forgot to let Garry know which train you was comin' on."

"Maybe he didn't get your telegram, Doro," Tavia suggested, shifting the burden of Miss Octavia Susan Petterby to the other arm. "They do sometimes do that, you know, in spite of all beliefs to the contrary. Look at this darling child, Doro," drawing the white knitted coverlet down from the dimpled chin of Octavia Susan. "Did you ever see anything so adorable in your life? She loves her Aunt Tavia, so she do!" she crooned in baby talk improvised to suit the occasion. "Went to sleep just like a kitty cat, all curled up in a cunnin' little ball. Oh, look, Doro, she's smiling in her sleep!"

"That means she has the stomach ache," said the baby's mother prosaically. "I'll have to give her some hot water when I get her home."

Tavia giggled.

"And I thought she was talking to the angels!" she mourned.

"She won't talk to no one, let alone angels, for some time to come," retorted the severely practical Sue. "And I'd just as lief she wouldn't,

anyways. Because Ma Petterby says as soon as they begin talkin' they begin getting into mischief, too."

"Oh, how is your mother, Lance?" asked Dorothy, suddenly remembering. "I have meant to ask you all along but there has been so much to talk about."

"She's fine, thank you, ma'am," responded Lance, his eyes lighting up as he spoke of his little old mother. "Ma thinks there ain't no place like Colorado now, and she thinks they ain't no gal like Sue here. Ma just dotes on Sue."

"Go long with you," protested Sue, blushing beneath the fond regard of her young husband. "You don't have to tell all the family secrets, do you?"

"As long as they's happy ones I don't see where we got any call to hide 'em," replied Lance mildly. "Anyways, my two women folks sure do get along fine."

"Two women folks," echoed Tavia, adding, with a wicked glance at Dorothy: "But how about the third, Lance? I am surprised you haven't mentioned her."

The simple Lance looked mystified.

"Third?" he repeated. "I don't seem to catch your drift, Miss Tavia."

"Why, Ophelia. You don't mean to say you

have forgotten Ophelia?" cried Tavia, and her voice was quite properly shocked.

"Sure enough, I nearly did forget to mention Ophelia," he drawled. "She is well and lively, thank you, ma'am, and I know she will be downright pleased when I tell her you asked about her."

"I am sure she will," returned Tavia, her face still grave. "I suppose she has a place of honor in the Petterby household, and a high chair at the table?"

"Oh, Tavia, hush," cried Dorothy in an undertone, thinking that the flyaway had gone far enough. But both Lance and Sue took the joking in good part, Sue even objecting energetically that Ma had that little hen clear spoilt to death; that it would be allowed to sit on the parlor sofa if it didn't like best to stay in the barnyard with the other chickens.

For Ophelia, despite her high-sounding name, was merely a humble fowl which Ma Petterby had brought up from a motherless chick and had carried with her from New York to Colorado in a basket made particularly for the purpose when she had come seeking her "baby," Lance Petterby.

"Ma would be plumb tickled out of her wits to see you," said Lance as the little car bounced into the last stretch of road that separated them from

the Hardin ranch. "Couldn't we go on a little ways further now we're about it and give the little old lady the surprise of her life?"

Although Susan Petterby added her hospitable invitation to his, Dorothy reluctantly refused, urging as a reason that she dared not delay her search for her brother.

"Now, don't you worry, ma'am," Lance urged as, a few minutes later, the light car came to a sputtering standstill before the rambling old structure that had once belonged to Colonel Hardin. "You will find the lad all right," he added diffidently, opening the car door for them. "I could take a canter over to Garry Knapp's ranch and see if everything's all right."

Dorothy assented gratefully and Tavia reluctantly handed the little warm bundle that was Octavia Susan over to her mother.

"I'm crazy about her and I am going to see her often," said Tavia to the parents of her namesake. "That is," she added, with the bright smile that seldom failed to get her what she wanted, "if you won't mind having me hanging around a lot."

The answer of Lance Petterby was prompt and flattering and that of Sue was hardly less so. For the heart of a mother is very tender where her offspring are concerned and Tavia had shown a gratifying interest in Octavia Susan.

"Ma will be tickled to see you," Lance repeated as he drove off in the rattly car. "Come over as soon as you can."

Lance Petterby's car had hardly disappeared around a turn in the road when a large, handsome woman appeared at the kitchen door of the house and, after one hasty glance at the newcomers, wiped her hands on a kitchen apron and bore down upon them.

"Land sakes!" she cried. "Miss Dorothy Dale and Miss Tavia! You did give me the surprise of my life, but I'm that glad to see you. Where is Major Dale, Miss Dorothy?"

CHAPTER XXII

A SURPRISE

DOROTHY had great difficulty in explaining to the kindly woman that her father not only had not accompanied her and Tavia to Desert City, but had no intention of doing so.

"But two young girls like you havin' the courage to travel all this ways alone!" the woman ejaculated, staring at them as though, in Tavia's words, they were "twin animals out of the zoo." "If that don't beat all!"

On the way to the house, and as briefly as possible, Dorothy explained to the woman—who was Mrs. Hank Ledger, wife of the foreman of the Hardin ranch—what had brought her to Colorado so unexpectedly.

The woman listened, her handsome head cocked to one side, and occasionally put in a pertinent question.

"Land sakes! I declare, that's too bad," she said, at the conclusion of Dorothy's brief recital. "I can't think what could have possessed the boy to have done such a thing. But there, that isn't

my business, I guess. Guess I'd better stir you up a bite to eat. Near starved, ain't you?"

The girls were grateful for her good-hearted tact that spared them the embarrassment of further questioning.

They saw nothing of the little Mexican girl who had formerly helped the foreman's wife around the ranch house. In her stead was a rather stolid country girl who responded to the name of Merry.

"I wonder where Flores is," said Tavia, when they were in their room for a quick wash and a change into their riding clothes which they had very thoughtfully packed in their grips. "It doesn't seem like the same old ranch with her missing."

"We must ask Mrs. Ledger about her when we go down," said Dorothy absently, and Tavia, noting her tone, turned thoughtful eyes in her direction.

"Worrying about Joe, Doro?"

"Do I ever do anything else lately?" retorted Dorothy, with a sigh. "But I am dreadfully worried about Garry too, Tavia. What Lance told us about this gang that is out to 'get him' is anything but comforting."

"Suppose you will be stepping over to Garry's ranch as soon as we get a bite to eat," suggested Tavia, and Dorothy nodded.

"If we can be said to step on horseback," she added.

"Well, the horse steps, doesn't it?" retorted Tavia, but Dorothy was again so absorbed in her unhappy thoughts that she did not hear this weak attempt at humor.

"Tavia," she cried, at last facing her chum, "why do you suppose Garry didn't come to meet the train to-day? I don't know whether to be dreadfully angry at him or terribly frightened for him."

"I don't believe I would be either until we find out more about him than we know at present, Doro," said Tavia gravely. "One thing is certain, we know Garry well enough to be sure he had a good reason for what he did."

"The kind of reason we won't enjoy finding out, maybe," muttered Dorothy so softly that Tavia asked for a repetition.

But instead of answering, Dorothy turned toward the door and opened it.

"I am going downstairs and get a piece of bread and butter if there is nothing else," she cried. "I can't stand the suspense any longer. I must know what has happened to Garry and Joe."

She was out of the room and down the stairs before Tavia had finished brushing her hair.

The latter, following more slowly, found her

chum seated before a repast of cold sliced chicken, current jelly, apple pie and milk.

"Make believe this doesn't look good to me," said Tavia, and she, too, sat down to prove her appreciation. Long before she had finished Dorothy rose and ran outside, calling to one of the Mexican boys to saddle two fast ponies.

She saw Hank Ledger, who shook hands with her formally, and hastily told him the story she had told his wife.

When she questioned him eagerly, asking him if he had seen Joe in the vicinity, he answered in the negative.

"Wherever he's been, he ain't come here," he assured her. "Hurry up with them ponies, lad," he called to the swarthy, grinning Mexican boy. "These here ladies are in a hurry."

Like his wife, Hank Ledger evidently believed in showing his sympathy in action rather than in words, and again Dorothy was grateful.

The Mexican appeared presently, leading two splendid ponies from the corrals which he presented to Dorothy with a white-toothed, cheerful grin.

"Fastest ponies we got," he assured her, and Dorothy recognized him as one of the lads who had been on the ranch during the eventful vacation she and her chum had spent there. "Nice ones, too. No bite, no kick. Gentle like kittens."

Dorothy thanked him with a smile and swung herself to the back of the little mustang, leading the other toward the house.

"I can send some of the boys over to the Knapp ranch with you, if you say so, Miss Dale," Hank Ledger called after her. In surprise Dorothy checked the pony and looked around at him. His voice had sounded anxious and his face, now that she saw it, matched his voice.

But anxious about what?

She asked this question aloud, and Hank Ledger's frown relaxed into a sheepish grin.

"Folks say that those as look for trouble generally git it," he answered enigmatically. "There ain't no reason for me orderin' a bodyguard for you, Miss Dale. Only I'd be mighty glad if you would let one of the boys go along with you. Your father not bein' here, I feel sort of responsible-like."

Still puzzled, Dorothy thanked him, but refused the bodyguard.

She wondered still more as she approached the house why the phlegmatic foreman had thought it necessary even to suggest such a thing.

Surely, bandits did not roam the roads in broad daylight!

Was it Stiffbold and Lightly and Larrimer he feared? But what danger was there to her and Tavia from any of these men?

She thought of Stanley Blake and the little man, Gibbons, who were in reality Stiffbold and Lightly. They would know soon—probably did already, for they had seen her and Tavia in conversation with Lance Petterby—that she and her chum had other interests in Desert City than the pursuit of a runaway boy.

Stiffbold had even confided in her to some extent concerning his plans. Would it not be natural then, when he learned, as he must, that she was engaged to Garry Knapp, for him to include her in any villainous schemes he might be hatching?

Dorothy felt a thrill of foreboding. She had been so busy worrying about others that she had never given a thought to her own safety.

But what did it matter? As long as she could feel that Garry and Joe were safe she would not very much care what happened to herself.

But she must get to Garry. In spite of all the Stiffbolds and Lightlys, she must get to Garry!

She saw Tavia coming from the house and beckoned to her impatiently.

"You never give a fellow half a chance to eat, Dorothy Dale," grumbed Tavia, as she came up to her. "I wanted another piece of apple pie and I went without it for your sweet sake. You ought to appreciate it—you really ought."

"Which I don't in the least," snapped Dorothy,

at the limit of her patience. "Are you going to get on this pony's back or must I go to the Knapp ranch alone?"

"Well, if I must," sighed Tavia, and threw her leg over the pony's shining back.

Something must have frightened the animal at that particular moment, for in a flash he flung up his head and dashed off across the fields in the direction of the corrals, with Tavia clinging wildly to his mane.

Dorothy gasped, touched her pony with her spur, and was off like a flash in pursuit.

Anything might have happened, but fortunately nothing very serious did.

The young Mexican who had saddled the animals saw the pony coming, swung to the back of another, and caught the bridle of the running pony as it passed, dragging it to a quivering standstill.

Tavia shifted to a more secure position in the saddle, felt her hair to see how greatly it had been disarranged, and, when Dorothy came up, was smiling winningly at the Mexican.

The latter whispered something in the runaway's ear, slapped it chidingly on the flank and turned it gently about till it was headed toward the roadway once more.

The pony seemed entirely tractable after that, and the two girls cantered slowly toward the road.

Suddenly Dorothy checked her mount and looked ahead with eager eyes.

"Look Tavia!" she cried. "Some one is coming!"

The rider proved to be Lance Petterby.

He drew up at sight of the two girls and waved his big sombrero at them.

"Been up to Garry's," he shouted, as the girls spurred up to him. "Been away all day. With most of his boys, too. Only an old, fat, half-deaf feller in charge, and he says Garry don't aim to be back much before nightfall."

The two girls exchanged glances and Dorothy's face fell.

"You didn't see anything of my brother Joe about the place, did you, Lance?" she asked, and the cowboy reluctantly shook his head.

"He warn't nowheres where I could get a sight of him, Miss Dorothy," he said, adding with an obvious attempt at reassurance: "But most likely if Garry aimed to be away all day he has took the lad with him for safe keeping."

"Then, I suppose, there is no use going to Garry's ranch if no one is at home," sighed Dorothy. "I don't understand it at all. Oh, Lance, what would you do if you were in my place?"

"I tell you what I'd do, ma'am," replied Lance Petterby cheerfully. "I'd come right along home with me, you and Miss Tavia, and see Ma. She's

mighty much offended that you ain't looked her up already. It might sort o' take your mind off things till Garry gets back."

"Oh, Dorothy, let's!" cried Tavia gleefully. "I do so want to see my namesake, my darling Octavia Susan, again. She is such a perfect pet and she loves her auntie, so she do."

Lance grinned and Dorothy's anxious expression relaxed into a smile.

"Very well," she said. "Only we must not stay very long, Lance. Garry may get back sooner than he expects."

"You can fix that just to suit you, ma'am," answered Lance obligingly. "I know how you feel, but I can tell you that if your brother Joe is with Garry Knapp his troubles and your'n are pretty nigh over."

"Yes, if he only is with Garry," Dorothy agreed wistfully.

They started down the dusty road away from the Knapp ranch and Desert City beyond, heading in the general direction of Dugonne.

They had only gone a short way, however, when Lance turned away from the road and led them down a trail that wound through the deepest part of the woodland.

"Talk about the primeval forest!" cried Tavia, in glee. "If this isn't it I am a dumbbell. Oh, forgive me, Doro darling. I really didn't mean

to say that dreadful word. I am about to join the nation-wide movement for a purer, better English—"

"I feel sorry for the movement then," said Dorothy wickedly, and Tavia went through the motions of turning up the collar of her riding coat.

"That was unnecessarily cruel," complained Tavia. "Before Lance, here, too! Never mind, I am quite sure he enjoys my slang; don't you, Lance?"

"You bet I do, Miss Tavia," agreed Lance, his grin broader than ever. "I never see you but what I add a few words to my vocabulary. Not that it needs it none," he added, with a chuckle.

They rode for a considerable distance through the woods, the ponies doing excellent work over the rough trail, and presently came to a small clearing in the center of which sat a tiny cabin that had "home" written in every line and angle of it.

Lance gave a peculiar whistle that brought both his "women folks" running to the door.

Yes, Ma Petterby ran, too, in spite of the fact that she was no longer young and that her old joints were crippled with rheumatism.

She received the girls with literally opened arms and seemed so genuinely overjoyed to see them

that Dorothy was glad she had yielded to Lance's suggestion.

The little house was as homelike inside as out, and the girls were shown through it all by the proud Sue, who had herself brightened and enriched the unpretentious rooms with pretty needlework and bright cretonnes.

They came back at last to the living room and Octavia Susan, rescued from a perilous position in her crib, was placed, cooing and gurgling, in the delighted Tavia's arms.

Ma Petterby regaled them with all the gossip of the countryside. Then, when questioned concerning Ophelia, the hen, she told the story of the little hen's entry into farmyard society with so much dry humor that the girls were thrown into gales of merriment.

It was Dorothy who finally suggested that they should be on their way back to the Hardin ranch.

Lance, who had disappeared to give the "women folks a chance to git real well acquainted," was nowhere to be found when the girls were ready to go, and both Ma Petterby and Sue urged the girls to "set and wait" till Lance got back.

But Dorothy, driven always by her anxiety concerning Joe, felt that she could not wait any longer. Garry would almost surely be back by

this time and she must get to him at the first possible moment!

Neither of the girls was the least afraid to go back alone. The trail, though narrow, was clearly marked and they knew that it would be very easy to return the way they had come.

"But it isn't safe for two young girls to wander around these woods alone," Ma Petterby protested. "Lance would be turrible put out if he was to think I'd permit it. He'll most likely be back before you get around that curve yonder."

"What did you mean when you said it wasn't safe in the woods?" asked Tavia, in her eyes the joyful gleam that the prospect of danger and excitement always brought to them. "Any lions or 'tagers' or such-like beasts loose, do you suppose?"

But Ma Petterby did not return Tavia's smile. She remained unusually grave and the face of Sue reflected that gravity.

"No lions or tigers that I knows on," she replied. "But they's been a panther hauntin' these woods of late."

"A panther! How gorgeous!" cried the irrepressible. "I have always wanted to meet one, Mrs. Petterby."

"Panthers aren't likely to attack without provocation, are they?" asked Dorothy, and this time it was Sue who answered.

"Most animals—wild animals, that is—would ruther slink off without making a fuss unless they're cornered and have to fight," she said. But after a momentary pause she went on with a grim tightening of her mouth that made her suddenly look like a man: "But there are some of 'em that are just naturally mean an' that likes to kill for the sake o' killin'. This panther's one o' that kind."

"Better wait inside for Lance," urged Ma Petterby again. "Under the circumstances, he wouldn't like for us to let you go."

But the girls persisted, pointing out that it was better for them to go then than to wait until evening should fill the woods with shadowy lurking places.

For once Tavia agreed with Dorothy and seconded her. Not that she was particularly anxious concerning Joe, for she had long since decided in her own mind that he was safe with Garry, but that mention of the panther had roused her curiosity and interest and made her doubly eager to start on the trail again.

The two girls turned to wave to Susan Petterby with little Octavia Susan in her arms and to Ma Petterby just before a sharp bend in the trail hid the small cabin from view.

"Cute little place they have," remarked Tavia, as she played idly with her pony's mane. "How

happy they are and how comfortable, and how simple that sort of life is, Doro. Just think, no bother about money, no worry about what you are going to eat for the next meal—just go out and kill a chicken if you are hungry——"

"Not Ophelia!" said Dorothy.

"Not Ophelia, of course," returned Tavia gravely. "That would never do. But, honestly, I think it must be fun to live that way."

Dorothy gave her a curious glance.

"Yes, you do!" she gibed. "I can see you living in that atmosphere just about one week, Tavia Travers, before you'd die from boredom. Excitement is your meat, my dear. Without it, you must starve."

"How well you have read my nature," said Tavia, with a sigh. "However, there is apt to be excitement enough if you can believe Ma Petterby and Sue," she added, with a giggle. "How about that man-eating panther they were telling about?"

"That may not be so much of a joke as you seem to think it," retorted Dorothy, with a nervous glance over her shoulder. "I've heard Garry say that panthers are often seen in this part of the world."

"Maybe; but I bet I'd never have the luck to see one," retorted Tavia dubiously, and Dorothy added a fervent:

"I certainly hope not!"

They had gone some distance along the trail when Tavia announced that she was a little stiff from riding and would rest herself by walking and leading her pony a little way.

"Good idea!" returned Dorothy, also dismounting with relief. "It takes a little time to become accustomed to horseback after you've been out of the saddle for a while. Whoa, now! What's the matter?"

This last remark was addressed to the horse, who had snorted and reared suddenly. His ears lay flat against his head and his eyes were distended with some nameless terror.

At the same moment Tavia's pony showed symptoms of fright and danced nervously off the trail, being brought back to it only by persistent persuasion on Tavia's part.

"Now, what on earth ails the beasts?" said Tavia, in exasperation. "Stand still there, will you? Do you want me to think you have St. Vitus' dance?"

"Something scared them—" began Dorothy.

"Oh, you don't say!" Tavia's retort was sharp and sarcastic, for the action of the ponies had alarmed her more than she cared to admit. "I could almost believe that without being told."

Dorothy took no notice of the acid in Tavia's tone, but continued to soothe her frightened pony.

After a moment of petting and coaxing he con-

sented to go on again, but his ears moved nervously and he walked daintily as though the rough ground of the trail were a carpet of eggs.

Tavia conquered her pony also, but as they went on again she was conscious of a nameless dread creeping over her.

Had she really heard something back there in the shadows of the woodland or had it been only an oversensitive imagination?

It was ridiculous to connect Ma Petterby's story of the panther with this suspicion. That miserable little pony had given her nerves a jolt, that was all.

She glanced at Dorothy to see if she shared her uneasiness, but aside from a frown of concentration Dorothy displayed no anxiety. She was still talking to her pony and stroking his shining coat.

"I won't look back into those woods. I won't!" declared Tavia, and immediately did that very thing.

She shivered and started violently. Something had slunk behind the trees—something that padded on stealthy feet!

Tavia had caught but a glimpse of that shadowy bulk, but it had been enough to crystallize her fears. She wanted to cry out to Dorothy, to shout her a warning of the danger that threatened them. But she was afraid to raise her voice

above a whisper, fearing that any sudden noise might precipitate a tragedy.

Dorothy, leading her pony gingerly a few steps behind Tavia, was blissfully unaware of any danger. And the worst of it was that Tavia herself could not be sure.

What was it that she had sensed slinking among the trees? She had seen something, but whether it was man or beast it was almost impossible to say.

The panther? That prowling, sinister beast? But it could not be! Panthers did not stalk their prey so long and patiently.

Again, against her will, she stole another glance into the shadows of the woods and glimpsed again that lurking form keeping always within the shelter of the trees.

There could be no doubt this time! This was no human being that followed them, but some great beast of the forest.

Perhaps it was not stalking them with the desire to attack. Perhaps, as she had read often of the wild inhabitants of the forest, it was following them out of curiosity. Sometimes, she recollected, trappers and hunters had been forced to endure this sinister, silent companionship for considerable distances until the beast tired and left them for more interesting company.

But she shuddered at the thought that the

animal, with the instinct of its kind, might soon realize that they were unprotected—had not even a gun between them. Then——

If she had only dared to pause long enough to mount her pony—to urge Dorothy to do so—they might still have a chance of escape. The ponies were swift and used to the broken trail. They might outstrip their pursuer or baffle it perhaps by the noise and confusion of their flight.

But she dared not pause, even for an instant. Dared call no warning to Dorothy which would almost certainly precipitate an attack by that lurking antagonist.

She cast another glance over her shoulder and felt her heart jump sickeningly as she saw the panther had gained upon them.

It was a panther. She could see the long slim body, not so bulky as the lion or tiger but almost as large, weaving its way, snake-like, through the dense foliage, jewel-like eyes greedily sinister, tail fairly touching the ground.

Dorothy intercepted that look of horror and cried out in fright.

"What is it, Tavia? Did you see something? Did you—" her voice trailed off into silence, for she also had seen.

The face she turned back to the watching Tavia was drawn and white with terror. She said nothing, but quickened her pace by slow degrees until

she was close behind Tavia on the narrow trail. The ponies now were dancing in terror, trying to break away.

"What are we going to do?"

Tavia asked the question more by the motion of her lips than in spoken words, for she, like Dorothy, felt it almost impossible to break that intense, waiting stillness.

Dorothy made a gesture pleading for silence, at the same time it urged Tavia to a little faster pace. It was plain that Dorothy, like her chum, had decided that their one chance lay in their ability to ignore the beast. By pretending not to notice him, they might gain time, might baffle him temporarily. The road could not be far distant!

There was a sound, slight in itself, but breaking upon that silence with a horrible significance, the sound of a cracking twig.

The creature was becoming bolder, was creeping up upon them!

The girls longed to cry out, to scream for help, yet could not utter a sound.

It was like a nightmare, this steady approach of the implacable beast. Their limbs felt suddenly paralyzed. They had a horrible sensation that they could not have run had they wanted to.

They were going faster, however. Without realizing it they had increased their pace till they

were almost running. Probably it was that that gave the stalking beast confidence. His victims were afraid! The two ponies resisted the efforts of the girls to hold them and broke away, bolting down the trail.

A swift, terrified glance behind her told Dorothy that the panther had advanced to within twenty paces of them. In another moment he would be crouching for the spring.

Dorothy called suddenly to her chum in a queer, high voice.

"Stop, Tavia! Stay where you are. I—I'm going to sing!"

"Sing!" For a moment Tavia could only stare in a paralysis of fright and consternation. Dorothy must have gone mad! Terror had turned her mind!

Dorothy had taken a stand, had faced the crouching beast. She opened her mouth and began to sing, tremulously, quaveringly, at first, in a cracked, thin voice that chilled the very marrow of Tavia's bones.

But the beast had halted, uncertain, baffled, had crouched close to the ground, baleful eyes fixed suspiciously upon Dorothy, tail angrily switching the ground.

Emboldened, Dorothy sang on, her voice gaining strength and confidence as she saw the effect

of her ruse. Tavia, standing still in the trail, mouth agape, watched as though hypnotized.

But it was the panther that was really hypnotized. Here was something he could not understand and which, consequently, disturbed and baffled him. No one had ever sung to him before, and he was instinctively afraid of the thing of which he had had no experience.

Gradually Dorothy and Tavia came to realize that the panther would not attack while Dorothy continued to sing. But how long could she keep it up? That was the question.

The cords of her throat were already aching with the strain, her voice was becoming thin and weak. She could not sing on forever. And when she stopped—what then?

Her voice broke, died away for a moment.

The great beast so close to them stirred, glared ferociously, moved toward them.

Dorothy began to sing again, and Tavia, suddenly ashamed of her silent part in the drama, began to sing too.

Her voice sounded queer to her and she had to labor over each note, but with relief they noticed that the beast relaxed again, ceased the nervous switching of its tail.

The two girls kept up the singing for what seemed to their overwrought nerves an eternity

of terror, and gradually they came to the realization that their voices were failing.

The great beast realized it, too. He was becoming nervous, uneasy, lustful. Inch by inch he was creeping forward, inch by inch!

Suddenly Tavia's voice faltered—stopped.

"I can't go on, Doro!" she whispered, hysterically. "I can't—I can't——"

With a snarl the great beast sprang forward, ears flat to his head, great paws extended!

A shot rang out and the panther fell, clawed desperately at the air in a curiously impotent gesture, lay still!

The two girls, clinging to each other, saw Lance Petterby come out of the shadows, smoking gun in hand.

CHAPTER XXIII

GONE AGAIN

It was decided by the girls and Lance Petterby that they would tell no one of their perilous adventure. Dorothy and Tavia were deeply grateful to Lance, who had followed them as soon as he had learned that they had left his cabin, and had, by so doing, undoubtedly saved their lives. At the same time, they were very anxious that no one outside of their little trio should know of the incident.

Lance, after catching and bringing back to them the two frightened ponies, escaped bashfully from the repeated expressions of gratitude of the girls, left them at the Hardin ranch with the declaration that he would ride straight to Garry's "diggings" and, provided that he had returned, would send him directly to them.

It was only a short time after that that Dorothy, still astride her little Mexican pony, espied a rider in the distance.

"Seems to be in a big hurry, too," said Tavia,

as her eyes followed the direction of Dorothy's pointing finger. "I wonder where the fire is."

"Tavia!" Dorothy's tone was sharp with excitement. "I think it is—why, I believe it is Garry!"

"Looks like a cloud of dust to me," scoffed Tavia. "In your case, I think, the wish is father to the thought, Doro mia."

"Well, let's wait here and see who it is, anyway," urged Dorothy. She noted the fact that Tavia looked at her curiously. "At the rate he is going I would hate to get in his way," she added. Dorothy was of no mind to tell her chum of Hank Ledger's mysterious behavior or of her own apprehension in regard to Stiffbold and Lightly.

They waited at the edge of the road for the horseman to come up. As the dust cloud cleared away and they could see him more plainly, Dorothy cried out with joy and urged her pony forward.

Tavia stared for a moment and then followed at a slow canter.

By the time she reached them, Garry's gray, dust-covered mare and Dorothy's little pony were close together. As for the riders, Tavia could not immediately tell which was which!

"Don't mind me!" she laughed. "If I am too

entirely out of the picture, just let me know and I will take myself hence."

Dorothy put aside the iron grip of Garry's arms and her pony reared uneasily. Garry caught its bridle, drew the little mustang up against his gray mare, and looked at Dorothy as though he were ready to begin all over again.

"Garry—don't!" she gasped. "Don't you—can't you—see that Tavia is here?"

"He doesn't," sighed Tavia. "But I forgive him even that."

Garry laughed and urged the gray mare across the road. He held out his hand and Tavia grasped it forgivingly.

"Sorry I didn't see you right away," apologized Garry. "You see," with an ardent glance in Dorothy's direction, "my vision was momentarily obscured."

"Not momentarily—perpetually when Dorothy is around, Garry, my lad," scoffed Tavia. "I've watched you when you weren't looking."

"Horrors! What spying wench is this?" cried Garry and, looking at Dorothy, saw that her face had suddenly become grave.

"Garry," she asked, "why weren't you at the train to meet us?"

"Well, listen to that!" cried Garry looking at his fiancée helplessly. "How could I meet a train

when I hadn't the remotest idea you had taken one!"

"Then you didn't know we were coming?" cried Dorothy. "You never got my telegram saying when I was coming?"

"Of course not, dear girl," said Garry gravely, as he took her pony's bridle and led it gently from the road and back up the graveled drive that led to the Hardin ranch house. "Do you suppose for a minute that if I had known you were coming out here I wouldn't have been cooling my heels at the station an hour ahead of time?"

"Of course, I supposed that," admitted Dorothy, turning her eyes away from the look in Garry's. "But I can't understand why my telegram didn't reach you."

"I got one telegram from you," said Garry. He looked around as though to make sure that no one was near them and said in an instinctively lowered tone: "You said something about overhearing some plot or other in which the conspirators hoped to land me one with a good large brick. Such plots as those are no novelty in my young life," he added grimly. "But I appreciate the warning, coming from a little brick."

"But, Garry," Dorothy's voice was tremulous and in her eyes was a haunting fear, "there is one thing I want to ask you. I've been hoping you would tell, because I didn't want to ask you.

I was afraid to ask you. Garry, have you seen Joe?"

Garry's face darkened and he pulled his horse to a standstill before the ranch house. Dorothy drew in her rein also and sat tensely watching him.

"I have seen Joe—yes," replied Garry slowly, showing a sudden burst of emotion. "And I wish to heaven I could let the story rest there!"

Dorothy grasped his arm wildly, imploring him.

"What do you mean, Garry? Tell me what do you mean! Oh, don't you see I've got to know?"

"There is so little I can tell you, dear girl," said Garry gravely. "I saw him. He came to me, half-starved and wild-eyed with an incoherent story about breaking away from a man who was trying to take him off into the mountains——"

"Larrimer!" gasped Dorothy, white-faced.

Garry nodded.

"Certainly Larrimer, judging from Joe's description and Lance Petterby's story of having seen the lad in the company of that villain."

"But, Garry—what next?" Dorothy was conscious that Garry was holding her hand in a tight grip and she clung to him desperately. "There is something else!"

"Yes," said Garry simply. "This morning Joe disappeared."

He put his arm about Dorothy, for she had reeled in her saddle and her face was so white it frightened him.

"Let me take you into the house, Dorothy," he urged. "Mrs. Ledger will fix you up."

But at the suggestion Dorothy seemed to gain strength.

"No, no!" she cried. "I am all right. Let me do what I must. Please, please, Garry."

"What is it you want to do, dear?" asked Garry gently.

"Go after Joe—now—this minute! He cannot have got far away if he only disappeared this morning, Garry!" She paused and regarded him intently. "Do you think it is possible Joe might have run away again of his own accord?"

"I certainly do not," returned Garry vehemently. "And if you had seen the poor lad when he stumbled on to my preserves, you wouldn't even have to ask that question. Why, he was almost tearful in his gratitude at being safe again, and I am quite sure nothing could have made him leave the place of his own accord. He had no reason to fear me."

"Then you think he was taken—kidnapped?" asked Dorothy slowly.

Garry nodded, his pitying eyes on her face.

"I wish I could have spared you all this, my dear," he said. "My men and I have been out scouring the hills ever since we discovered the lad's disappearance. I had just come back to the ranch to see if there had been any developments there when Lance Petterby came along and told me you girls were here on the ranch. Of course I then spurred right on here."

"But who would do such a thing?" cried Dorothy pitifully. "What motive could any one possibly have in tormenting my poor Joe?"

"I don't know," replied the young Westerner grimly, "unless it was some of Larrimer's crowd hoping through him to get at me. If that's their scheme I will pretty quickly show them where they get off! Caught Philo Marsh hanging around the place, and I pretty near kicked him over the fence."

"Philo Marsh!" cried Tavia, who had listened in silent sympathy to Garry's revelations concerning Joe. "Is he still around here?"

"He is!" said Garry shortly. "Wherever the smoke is thickest and the trouble hottest, there you may expect to find Mr. Philo Marsh."

"Same evil, old bird of prey, too, no doubt!" exclaimed Tavia.

"Do you think he was the one who kidnapped Joe?" asked Dorothy. She was strangely quiet now. But in her burned a determination that

grew stronger with each moment. "Have you any reason to suspect him more than the others?"

"None whatever except that I happened to see him just before Joe disappeared. Philo Marsh is pretty closely connected with Larrimer and those other arch-knaves, Stiffbold and Lightly, just now; but of course it might have been any of the others."

"What did you mean just now by saying that they might hope to strike at you through Joe?" asked Dorothy slowly, as though she were painstakingly trying to reason things out for herself. "I didn't quite understand you, Garry."

"That is only because you do not know my enemies, dear," returned Garry. "Those fellows have done everything in their power to run me off my land. The longer I thwart them, the more determined they get. They are trying to force me to sell out for a song, sign my lands over to them."

"But you won't?" cried Dorothy.

"I guess not!" Garry's eyes kindled and his fist clenched. "But it is possible that in this move—this kidnapping of the boy—they may hope to force me to something that they never could otherwise."

"You mean," said Dorothy slowly, "that if you agree to sign over your land to them at a ridiculous price they will release Joe?"

Garry nodded.

"And if you don't agree?"

Garry's face paled. Then he turned to Dorothy, caught her hands in his, gripping them fiercely.

"I promise you, Dorothy, that they shall never hurt Joe!"

CHAPTER XXIV

A WASTED BULLET

THEN Dorothy did an astonishing thing—for her. She leaned over and kissed Garry with such an air of faith and trust that Tavia turned away. She had a horrible suspicion that she was going to cry.

But the sudden appearance of Hank Ledger and others of the ranch hands saved Tavia from that fate.

After one long look at Dorothy, in which she could read many things, Garry turned to the newcomers. He rapidly went over the details of Joe's disappearance and enlisted their aid in carrying out a more thorough search than had yet been made.

Dorothy thrilled when she saw how ready they all were to back him up. But Garry knew that it was not only for him or for Dorothy or for Joe that they so readily promised their help, although he had reason to believe that they were all friends of his, but because they one and all hated Larrimer and his gang with a deadly hatred

and welcomed the chance to even up some old scores.

There was one young "broncho buster," a strapping lad in his early twenties, who testified to having seen a boy and two men riding toward the mountains.

Garry whirled on him swiftly.

"Who were these two men?" he demanded.

The young fellow shook his head sadly.

"I sure would give a barrel of money to be able to honestly tell you that, boss," he answered. "I tried to get up to them, but they was goin' all-fired fast and when they saw me they continued on the way they was goin', only about three times as fast."

"Why didn't you-all try a bullet on him, Steve?" drawled one of his mates as he slouched in the saddle, hat drawn low over a pair of fiery blue eyes. "That there might have added an element of persuasion, so to speak."

"Yes, that there's just what I did," the youngster responded sadly. "And wasted a good bullet on a couple o' rattlesnakes. Even at that distance I was middlin' sure I recognized 'em."

"Well, speak out, man," commanded Garry sharply. "We're in a hurry. Who were they, to your thinking?"

"Near's I could make out they was Philo Marsh and Stiffbold, boss," returned the lad, and a

muttering like the rumble of thunder in the distance came from the little knot of men. "Philo tries to ride his horse's head and bounces in the saddle like a tenderfoot. I couldn't be so sure about Stiffbold, but I was sure enough to waste a good bullet on him."

"Well, let's go!" cried Garry, wheeling his horse so suddenly that it reared and bucked alarmingly. "With the information you have been able to give us, Steve, we ought to be able to find these fellows without much difficulty. We will be back before long, Dorothy, and the next time you see us we will have Joe along. Promise not to worry!"

Dorothy looked at him in swift alarm.

"You don't mean that you intend to go without me and Tavia!" she cried, still incredulous, though he nodded decisively in answer. "Why, Garry, you can't! We can't stay here alone, thinking, wondering!"

"But this is a man's job, Dorothy," Garry explained gently. "You would only hamper us and hold us back in the search for Joe. You don't want to do that, do you?"

Dorothy turned away, her lip quivering. Garry took her hand and gripped it fiercely for a moment. Then turnd to his men and nodded.

"Let's go!" he called again, and there was an answering shout, triumphant and fierce, as the

others closed in after him and galloped down the road in a cloud of dust.

The two girls remained quiet until the clatter of hoofs had died away in the distance, Dorothy, trying to fight the bitter disappointment that burned within her, Tavia staring thoughfully after the cavalcade.

The latter finally looked at Dorothy, a quizzical and sympathetic smile playing about the corners of her mouth.

"Come on, Doro, don't take it so much to heart," she urged, adding judicially: "Of course you know Garry is right—really—although it isn't very pleasant to be told that you will be in the way."

"I shouldn't be in the way. He doesn't know me yet," said Dorothy, in a stifled voice. "And I wanted to go with him, to look for Joe."

"Of course you did, you poor dear," said Tavia sympathetically. Then she added, as a daring gleam crept into her pretty eyes: "And I don't know that Garry ought to have everything to say about it, at that!"

Dorothy turned quickly toward her. A hot flush rose to her face.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"Oh, Doro, you know well enough what I mean. Why pretend you don't?" By this time Tavia's eyes were frankly dancing. "Since when,

I ask you, have we come to the point where we may be ordered about by any man?"

"You mean," cried Dorothy breathlessly, "that you suggest that we organize a search party of two?"

"Who said I was suggesting anything?" protested Tavia impishly. "I can't open my mouth but what my words are misconstrued."

"Misconstrued, your grandmother!" retorted Dorothy rudely, at which Tavia chuckled in great delight. "I haven't lived with you all my life, Tavia—more or less—without being pretty sure what you mean, as a rule. Are you coming or must I go alone?"

"Well, of all the nerve!" crowed Tavia in huge delight, as she spurred her mount down the road in the wake of Dorothy's mettlesome pony. "I'll say there is nothing slow about Dorothy these days—or Garry either. This promises to be a real interesting party."

"I say, Dorothy," she called, as she urged her pony neck and neck with Dorothy's galloping mount, "we ought to work out some plan of attack, you know. We really ought. We'll probably just be rushing into trouble this way."

With difficulty Dorothy drew her pony to a walk and regarded her chum thoughtfully.

"I don't know how we can make any plans

when we haven't the slightest idea what we are going to do next," she said.

"We know just as much as Garry," Tavia retorted. "That good-looking cowboy—Steve, did Garry call him—said that the two men and the boy disappeared in that direction," and she swept an arm toward the mountains rising majestically before them. "Look!" she cried suddenly, leaning from the saddle and gripping Dorothy's arm. "Do you see those two tall peaks with the smaller one between? If we keep our eye on that formation we can't go far wrong."

"But we shall lose sight of your church spires as soon as we enter the woods," objected Dorothy, and Tavia's face fell.

"That's right," she admitted. "You're a better man than I am, Dorothy Dale. Oh, but I'll tell you what," she added, on the crest of another illumining thought. "There's a trail—the one we used to follow when we were here before, don't you remember? I am very sure that winds through the woods in the general direction Steve pointed out. It probably is the very one the kidnappers used when they spirited Joe away," she added triumphantly.

"I wish you wouldn't call them kidnappers, Tavia," Dorothy objected nervously. "It sounds so horrid."

"Well, I could think of a good many worse

things to call Philo Marsh and your gallant friend, Stiffbold," retorted Tavia. "Doro—I do believe—why, yes, here is the trail right here!"

Tavia had checked her horse at the edge of the wood and Dorothy turned her own pony, riding back to her.

"Looks like a pretty dark and gloomy one to me," she said, eyeing the narrow, rocky path through the woods with marked disfavor. "But if it's the best you can do, I suppose we might try it."

"Such is gratitude!" sighed Tavia. "I ought never to expect it."

"Tavia!" Dorothy was ahead, leading her horse carefully up the narrow trail that rose steeply as it followed the rise of the mountain. Her voice, muffled, came back eerily to Tavia as she followed. "I suppose Aunt Winnie would think we were crazy to do a thing like this."

"We are," retorted Tavia, adding with a chuckle: "But as soon as I cease to be crazy I shall want to die!"

"The Major would understand though," said Dorothy, still as though talking to herself. "He would know that I couldn't stand back and just wait when Joe was in danger."

"You bet he would, honey," said Tavia reassuringly. "You could count on the Major to understood every time."

"Do you think we are following the right trail?" Dorothy asked, some time later.

They had reached a level spot and paused to rest their ponies, and were looking back the way they had come.

"I don't know," returned Tavia, with a thoughtful shake of her head. "All we can do is to follow the trail as far as it goes, Doro, and hope for the best. Hark! What's that?"

CHAPTER XXV

THE STORM

THERE came to the girls' ears the grumbling of thunder, faint at first but growing louder as it flung itself against the lofty mountains. A flash of lightning illumined the semi-dusk of the woods.

The ponies pricked up their ears nervously and danced a little, threatening to unseat their riders. But the girls spoke to them gently and soothingly and in a moment had them under control again.

"I suppose we ought to go back," said Dorothy. "You know what storms are up here. And the ponies don't like the thunder."

"So it seems," said Tavia dryly, adding, as she turned her pony so that its nose was pointing toward the trail again: "You may go back, if you like, Dorothy Dale, but I am going on. You are not afraid of a little storm, are you?"

"Only this doesn't promise to be a little one," replied Dorothy shortly. "But come on. If we keep the ponies on the trail——"

"All may yet be well," finished Tavia. "Whew —that was a bad one!" she added, as a terrific

crash of thunder flung itself against the mountainside and retreated, grumbling ominously.

The ponies attempted to stand on their hind legs again but the girls only urged them on the faster.

The storm was waxing fast and furious now. The wind tore down upon them in titanic gusts, catching at their breath, whipping twigs and branches across their faces, fairly blinding them.

Another terrific crash of thunder came, a vicious streak of lightning, and then the rain!

It did not come slowly in gentle little drops, but burst upon them in full fury, soaked them to the skin in its first onslaught, enveloped them in a solid sheet of water.

They struggled on, urging their reluctant ponies up the rocky trail—up and up, while the trail grew ever steeper, the ground more thickly strewn with rocks and tree stumps, more impassable.

It seemed to the girls that they were like flies, clinging to the walls of a precipice.

A hideous crash of thunder, more terrific than any that had preceded it, broke shatteringly above them and seemed to cause the very ground beneath their feet to tremble.

Dorothy's pony, scrambling over a huge boulder in the trail, slipped, stumbled, caught itself, and then, in fright, reared suddenly backward.

Caught unawares, Dorothy shot from her

saddle like a bullet from a gun and rolled down the steep incline directly beneath the feet of Tavia's prancing pony.

The whole thing was so sudden, so horrible, that Tavia could only gasp in sickening fear.

But it was the gallant beast she rode that saved the life of her chum, helpless beneath the death-dealing hoofs.

The pony reared, balanced with his forefeet in the air for a moment while Dorothy's life hung in the balance. Then, with a terrific effort and almost human intelligence, he flung himself backward and to one side.

Even then his forefeet came to earth gently, tentatively, making sure that they touched only earth and stone. Then he stood quite still, shivering.

Dorothy lay beneath his body, her arm flung out, her face turned upward to the sky. She was as still as death and a sinister red spot grew upon her forehead—grew and widened while two tiny rivulets of blood ran down her cheek.

For a moment Tavia stared down at her chum as though paralyzed. She dared not move for fear her action might excite the shivering pony and cause him to move only the fraction of an inch.

"But I must get down," she told herself dully, as though in a terrible dream. "Any minute the

pony may move. Anyway—oh, Dorothy! Dorothy!"

Slowly and with infinite care she let herself down from the saddle on the opposite side from her chum, speaking gently to the pony, patting his neck, urging him to stand quietly.

But the gallant little beast needed no urging. He knew as well as Tavia that a human life depended on his ability to remain absolutely still.

Except for the nervous quivering of his muscles he stood like a horse carved out of rock as Tavia lifted her chum from her perilous position and laid her gently on the grass beside the trail.

The thunder was more frequent, more deafening in its increasing nearness. The rain continued to pour down in a great torrential flood.

Tavia's hair had come down and was clinging soddenly to her face and neck. She had to push it back before she could look at Dorothy, shake her, wildly call her by name, beg her sobbingly to open her eyes and look at her.

The blood was still coming from the cut in Dorothy's forehead, but aside from that vivid blotch of color, her face was deadly pale.

Tavia sought for and found a clean handkerchief in the pocket of her riding coat. With this she sought to staunch the wound. The handkerchief became red and sodden and still the wound bled freely, sickeningly.

Tavia stumbled to her feet and, with a hand before her eyes to ward off the twigs and branches that lashed at her face, fought her way back along the trail toward a spot where they had passed a mountain brook.

She knelt beside the stream, saturated the handkerchief with the almost ice-cold water, and returned to Dorothy. Several times she made the trip, until she was bruised and torn and panting.

Finally she had her reward. The blood ceased to flow and, washing away the last traces of it, Tavia was able to inspect the wound more closely.

To her surprise and intense relief she found that, instead of being on her forehead, the cut began farther up, on the scalp, just reaching past the line of the hair.

That then, was the reason it had bled so profusely. A scalp wound is in appearance usually worse than in reality, sending out wild signals of distress when there is really very little to be distressed about.

Dorothy had evidently in falling struck upon a pointed stone, gashing the scalp jaggedly and in such a way that it seemed an ugly wound.

"Might have killed her," muttered Tavia. "If she would only open her eyes! Perhaps some water—" But the irony of that suggestion curved her lips in a wry smile. Foolish to talk of water

when nature was supplying it in bucketfuls, free of charge!

At that moment Dorothy stirred, lifted her hand in an aimless gesture and made as though to rise.

Tavia put a hand beneath her chum's head, lifting her a little.

"Take it easy, Doro honey," she advised gently. "You have had a pretty hard knock, and it may take a little while for you to remember what happened. Oh, keep still, will you!" she cried to the elements in senseless fury as a crash of thunder shook the earth, drowning out her last words. "Don't you know it isn't polite to interrupt a person while she's talking? Doro darling," as Dorothy once more made an effort to rise, "how are you feeling?"

"All right—I guess," said Dorothy unsteadily. "I seem a little—dizzy."

Tavia tried to laugh and made a rather dismal failure of it.

"I should think you might," she said. "After a fall like that!"

"What happened?" asked Dorothy, sitting up, her hand feeling instinctively for the painful cut in her head. "I fainted, didn't I?"

"You surely did, Doro, my love!" responded Tavia, once more herself now that Dorothy was out of danger. "You fainted good and plenty,

and I don't mind telling you you gave me the scare of my life."

"Sorry—but I guess we had better get away from here," said Dorothy, still faintly, looking uneasily about her. She clapped her hands to her ears nervously as another thunder clap broke above their heads. "Help me, Tavia, please—I feel a little—weak."

She tried to stumble to her feet, but sank down again with a cry of alarm.

"Not so fast!" Tavia scolded her. "You lost quite a good deal of blood, my dear, if you did but know it, and naturally you feel pretty faint."

"Blood!" echoed Dorothy alarmed. "I had no idea——"

"Only a scalp wound," Tavia said quickly. "But it bled like sixty. Now, let's try it again. That's the idea. Feel better?"

Dorothy stood, swaying a little on her feet, Tavia's supporting arm about her shoulders.

"I guess I don't remember just what happened, but I guess I must owe my life to you, Tavia."

"No, you don't," denied Tavia quickly, adding, as she pointed to the pony standing quietly enough now where she had left it. "There's the fellow you ought to thank!"

CHAPTER XXVI

A GENTLEMAN

DOROTHY looked bewildered. Swiftly and with a return of the emotion she had felt at that time of her chum's great peril, lending eloquence to her words, Tavia told Dorothy what had happened.

"That blessed pony knew you were lying there, helpless under his feet," she said, "and, like the gentleman and thoroughbred he is, he wasn't going to hurt a lady if he could help it. You should have seen him, Doro, pawing the air to make sure he wasn't touching you.

"And then when I pulled you out from under him he stood so still you would have thought he was holding his breath for fear he would move. I never saw an animal act like that. He was human, Doro!"

Dorothy took an uncertain step toward the little pony, hands outstretched, and Tavia regarded her curiously.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

There was a curious catch in her voice as Dorothy answered softly:

"I am going to thank—a gentleman."

She put an arm about the pony's neck and with her other hand gently stroked his soft muzzle. And as though he understood what she was trying to say to him, the little horse nuzzled against her shoulder and whinnied gently.

Suddenly Tavia thought of the other pony, the one that had so nearly precipitated Dorothy to her death.

She found him standing on the ledge above them, tossing his head nervously now and then at some particularly harsh rumble of thunder or flash of lightning, but making no attempt to stray away.

"Lucky for us they gave us a couple of gentle, domesticated ponies," remarked Tavia, as she climbed the trail to bring the pony back to the spot where Dorothy was standing, her arm still about the neck of the little horse. "One with a wilder strain in him would have shown us his heels long since and one of us would have been obliged to walk back."

Returning with the captured pony slipping and sliding down the trail behind her, Tavia looked anxiously at her chum.

"Do you think you are strong enough to sit in a saddle, Doro? Because if you're not——"

"Oh, I am," protested Dorothy quickly. "I feel strong enough to do anything except stay

in this awful place, Tavia. Listen to that thunder!"

"Quite a pretty storm!" Tavia admitted. "Now, Doro dear, if you will let me help you into the saddle, perhaps we had better start."

"We are going back though," asserted Dorothy almost defiantly, and was relieved when Tavia agreed with her.

It was obvious that with Dorothy in her present condition, they could gain nothing by going on. The only sensible thing, under the circumstances, was to return to the safety and comfort of the ranch. Mrs. Hank Ledger's kitchen seemed particularly alluring to them just then!

Tavia helped Dorothy into the saddle—almost lifted her, in fact—and was more than ever alarmed to see how much the accident had weakened her chum.

Dorothy was game—game as they come—she told herself loyally. But nothing could hide the trembling hands and the fact that it required all Dorothy's will power, even with Tavia's help, to climb into the saddle.

It had been tacitly decided that Dorothy should ride Hero—for so she had dubbed the little horse in appreciation of what he had done—on the return journey.

But as she turned the pony's head and looked

back over the sharply-sloping trail up which they had clambered, Dorothy's heart misgave her.

The descent would be infinitely more difficult than the ascent had been. The ponies, though sure-footed and used to the rough mountain trails, would be in constant danger of slipping on the wet rocks and moss.

Guessing her thoughts, Tavia urged her own pony close to her chum and stood for a moment beside her, staring down the steep descent.

"Looks pretty bad, doesn't it?" she said soberly, after a moment. "But I guess we will have to risk it, Doro. We can't very well stay where we are."

"No, we can't stay where we are," repeated Dorothy automatically, adding, as she pressed her hand, palm out, against her forehead: "But I am so dizzy, Tavia. When I look down it seems as if the earth rose up to meet me."

"Then don't look down!" cried Tavia sharply, noting with an access of alarm that Dorothy reeled in the saddle as she spoke. "Look up as much as you can, Doro, and hold on tight to the pony's mane if you feel yourself slipping. Oh, I wish Garry were here!"

Perhaps she had revealed more of her alarm than she had meant to in that exclamation.

At any rate, Dorothy looked at her queerly,

and, with a huge effort of will, jerked herself upright in the saddle.

"I'm all right, Tavia," she said courageously. "I'll keep hold of the pony's mane as you said. But, Tavia—you go first!"

Her heart full of misgivings, Tavia urged her pony forward and began the steep and slippery descent to the road far below.

It seemed for a little while that the elements, having given them a taste of what they could really do if put to it, had decided to take mercy on them.

There was a lull in the storm. The rain continued to fall, but more gently, and the thunder seemed to have spent its fury, retiring into the distance with muttered and ever decreasing rumblings.

But just as the girls, making slow progress of it and stopping every now and then to rest and give Dorothy a chance to rally her forces, had begun to hope that the storm was almost over, it burst upon them again, more furiously than ever.

Came the rain again and then the wind, bending trees backward before its onslaught, driving the rain relentlessly into their faces, forcing them to halt every few paces to pass a hand across their blinded eyes and peer anxiously along the trail.

"We shall be lost if we don't look out," Dorothy panted, during one of these pauses.

"Look out!" repeated Tavia, with a brief laugh. "Fine chance we have to look out when we can't see more than a few feet before our faces. How are you feeling, Doro—any stronger?"

"Oh, I'm all right," Dorothy responded. But in spite of the brave assertion, Tavia knew that she was not all right, that she was fighting every inch of the way to keep herself erect in the saddle. Despite her effort to hide it, Tavia saw that she was trembling all over.

"Cold?" she asked, and again Dorothy shook her head, this time almost impatiently.

"Let's go on," she cried. "We must be very near the road by this time."

But Tavia knew that they were not near the road. In fact, it was not very long before Tavia made a discovery that startled her. In the sudden fright that caught at her throat she must have made some sort of an ejaculation, for Dorothy, reining up beside her, called above the noise of the storm:

"Did you say anything, Tavia?"

"Nothing, except that we are not on the trail," retorted Tavia calmly. "Dorothy, I am very much afraid that we are lost!"

CHAPTER XXVII

WHAT WAS THAT?

DOROTHY stood very quiet for a moment, saying nothing, just staring at her chum.

Then suddenly she began to laugh—a wild sort of laughter that had tears in it.

Tavia looked at her sharply, then reached out a hand and gripped her hard.

"Dorothy, you've got to stop that!" she cried. "There isn't anything to laugh about—really, you know."

"That's why I'm laughing, I guess!" retorted Dorothy.

But she had stopped her untimely mirth and was gazing moodily enough at the sodden, dreary forest about them.

"We shouldn't be standing under a tree in a thunder and lightning storm," she said absently. "It's dangerous."

It was Tavia's turn to laugh.

"So I've heard," she said. "And if you can tell me any way that we can avoid it, I'll be very grateful. Oh, Doro, what's the use? We are just stuck, that's all."

That fact was so obvious that Dorothy did not take the trouble to answer it.

"It's all my fault," said Tavia after a moment, her voice sounding queer and remote above the clamor of the storm. "I ought to have looked where I was going."

"It isn't your fault any more than mine," Dorothy declared. "Anyway, nobody could look where she was going in this storm."

"Well, I suppose we might as well go on," said Tavia, slapping the reins upon the pony's sleek and steaming back. "If we have luck we may stumble on the path."

"Stumble is right," said Dorothy wearily, as she urged her reluctant pony onward. "Oh, if I could only lie down somewhere," she added, in a tone that she made sure would not reach Tavia. Then the absurdity of her wish appealed to her and in spite of the misery and danger of their predicament, she was forced to laugh at herself.

"So many nice comfortable places around here to lie down in," she told herself, sweeping a hand about at the sodden landscape. "Although it would be hard to be more wet and miserable than we are just now," she added.

They wandered on for a long time—they had no conception of just how long. Finally, because the chill was creeping into their bones and they felt stiff and cramped in their saddles, they dis-

mounted and stumbled along on foot, leading their ponies.

At least they would get some exercise and keep the blood stirring in their veins.

Then at last relief came, or partial relief. The storm at last blew itself away and the sun—a faltering and late-afternoon sun, but the sun nevertheless—broke through the heavy clouds.

Tavia was inclined to greet him with loud exclamations of joy, but Dorothy was too bruised and anxious and miserable of mind and body to care very much whether the sun shone or not.

They sat down after a while on a couple of rocks that seemed not quite so wet as the surrounding country to talk things over.

"Garry and the rest of the handsome cowboys must be somewhere in the neighborhood," said Tavia, determined to take a cheerful view. "And if one of them doesn't stumble upon us Garry is sure to send out a searching party as soon as he finds we are gone."

"But he won't know we are gone till he gets back to the ranch, and that may be late to-night," Dorothy pointed out to her, adding with a little moan: "What will he think of me when he finds what I have done!"

"What we have done," corrected Tavia. "Anyway, he will be far too glad to get you back again to scold. You can be sure of that."

"And Joe! We have done a lot toward finding Joe!" went on Dorothy bitterly. "Those men could have done anything they liked to him as far as we are concerned. As trailers we are a brilliant success!"

"We haven't set the world on fire yet," Tavia admitted, as she jumped briskly to her feet. "But there is no use giving up the old ship so soon. As long as we can't find our way out of the trackless forest we might as well make good use of our time and keep on hunting for Joe."

Dorothy stared at her chum for an instant. Then she also got to her feet, though stiffly and wearily. She was beginning to be achingly conscious of numerous bruises she had not known she possessed, of sharp twinges in her back and arms that made her want to cry aloud with the stabbing pain.

But if anything could be done, if there was the slightest chance of finding Joe—though this she doubted—she would not give up.

"You are a confirmed optimist, Tavia honey," she said. "But I'm glad you are. You make a mighty-much cheerfuller companion, that way."

"You said it!" Tavia replied, as they started on slowly, leading the horses. "Although I must confess that, internally, I am not as cheerful as I have sometimes been. Something whispers that

it has been a long, long time since I gratified my craving for sustenance."

"Oh, I don't believe I can ever eat again!" cried Dorothy.

"You just wait till somebody tries you on a good hot plate of stew or some good hot vegetable soup," advised Tavia sagely. "My, what would I give for a sniff of Mrs. Hank Ledger's kitchen just now!"

"Oh, don't! What is the use!" cried Dorothy, and to Tavia's complete surprise and dismay she began to cry, not violently, but softly and pathetically as if she could no longer check the tears.

"Doro darling!" cried Tavia, putting an arm about her chum in instant sympathy and alarm. "What is the matter? You? Why, you never did this before!"

"I know it," replied Dorothy, dabbing at her eyes with a sodden handkerchief. "But I ache so, Tavia, and I am so frightened about Joe, and I wish Garry were here. Then, when you spoke of the ranch kitchen, it was just about the last straw!"

"You might know I would go and put my foot in it!" cried Tavia penitently and quite at a loss what to do next. "You poor girl. You got horribly banged up with that fall. If you weren't the best sport ever you wouldn't go on at all. But honestly, Doro, I don't know what to do."

"Of course you don't," cried Dorothy, trying to smile and succeeding pretty well, considering. "And I am a goose to act this way——"

She stopped short, a curious expression leaping to her eyes.

What was that she had heard?

Had it been a wail—a cry for help?

Nonsense! In this wilderness?

Again it came, and this time unmistakable.

She clung to Tavia, her face terrible to see in its agony of doubt, of sudden hope.

"Some one is in trouble!"

Tavia whispered the words as though loth to break the tense silence between them.

But suddenly Dorothy broke from her, running wildly, blindly through the woods.

"It's all right, Joe darling! I'm coming! Dorothy's coming!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

A VOICE IN THE MOUNTAIN

TAVIA overtook Dorothy, grasped her fiercely by the arm and clapped a frantic hand upon her mouth.

"Hush, Doro! Are you mad?" she whispered fiercely. "There is something queer going on here. You must not let any one hear you."

"But it was Joe!" cried Dorothy, struggling frantically to be free. "Didn't you hear? It was Joe's voice! Let me go, Tavia! Let me go!"

"Not until you can listen to reason," cried Tavia, and Dorothy suddenly became quiet, staring at her tensely.

"Oh, you are right—of course you are right," she said, making a terrible effort to calm herself. "I was a little mad, I guess. Joe calling for help. Tavia, we must go to him quickly!"

"Of course we must," agreed Tavia soothingly. "But it won't do us any good to rush in when we don't know what we may be rushing into. Besides, how can you be sure that was Joe's voice?"

"Oh, Tavia, I know! Don't you suppose I would know his voice anywhere?"

Tavia nodded and scanned the mountain side with puzzled eyes.

"Where do you suppose it came from?" asked Dorothy, her voice lowered to a whisper. She was beginning to tremble and her teeth chattered uncontrollably. "It sounded as if——"

"It came from the side of the mountain," Tavia replied. "I can't understand it, but if we go cautiously we probably can solve the mystery."

But to "go cautiously" was the last thing Dorothy wanted to do just then. Usually the cautious one, accustomed to restraining the impetuous Tavia, now the tables were reversed. Dorothy was the one who could brook no delay, Tavia the one who counseled caution.

But though Dorothy's heart urged her to fly to Joe, knowing that he was in peril, her head whispered that Tavia's advice was sound—that they must proceed with infinite caution if they meant to help her brother.

When Tavia said that the sound seemed to come from the side of the mountain she had meant to be taken literally.

Through the woods and directly in front of them they could see the mountain where it rose abruptly upward. There was no trail at this point, for here the mountain was practically unclimbable.

The trail, the one they had lost, zigzagged tortuously this way and that seeking those sections of the mountain where it was possible for men to force a pathway.

"We had better tether our ponies here," Dorothy suggested softly. "If we take them much farther they are apt to whinny."

"Excellent idea!" said Tavia, suiting the action to the word. "Now, we'll see what is funny about that mountain."

Silently they crept through the woods, careful to avoid twigs that might crack under their feet.

Once when Tavia caught her toe in the gnarled root of a tree and fell full length upon the ground, she lay there for several seconds, afraid to move while Dorothy stood motionless, her hand touching the trunk of a tree to steady herself.

Nothing happened, no sound broke the murmurous silence of the woods, and finally they gained courage to start again.

They had gained some distance when Dorothy stopped, bewildered, and reached out a hand to Tavia.

"It's queer we don't hear any further sound from him," she said, her lips close to Tavia's ear. "I can't tell which way to go, can you?"

Tavia shook her head and was about to speak when Dorothy raised her hand imploringly.

She had heard another sound, and they were startlingly close to it.

A man was speaking and although they could not hear the words they could tell by his tone that they were angry and threatening. And again the voice seemed to come from the heart of the mountain itself.

"Where in the world *does* that voice come from?" whispered Tavia. "I don't mind telling you, Doro, that it has me scared."

Dorothy held up her hand again, gesturing for silence. Then, before Tavia knew what she was up to, Dorothy flung herself face down upon the ground and with infinite caution made her way, eel-like, toward a huge rock that jutted out from the mountainside.

Wondering, Tavia followed her example.

Dorothy did not increase her speed even when a sharp cry rang out, shattering the silence with breath-taking abruptness.

"I won't do it—you—you—" came a boy's voice, broken and furious. "You wouldn't try to make me do a thing like that if you weren't a lot of cowards! You wait till I tell Garry! You just wait!"

"Oh, we'll wait all right, kid."

The girls were near enough now to hear the sneering words, although the tone was still carefully lowered.

The boy tried to answer, but a heavy hand across his mouth strangled the defiance.

Dorothy had reached the jutting, out-flung rock and had solved the mystery of the mountain.

For the rock served as a gigantic door, almost blocking up the entrance of a cave that seemed to extend far into the mountain. From where she and Tavia had stood when Joe's desperate cry first reached their ears, the rock entirely concealed the entrance to the cave.

A most excellent retreat and one admirably adapted to the needs of Larrimer and his gang!

Tavia crowded close to her side and Dorothy saw that she also had discovered the answer to the riddle.

With infinite caution Dorothy crept still closer to the entrance of the cave, peering around the edge of the rock.

The cave was so dark that at first she could see nothing.

Then, as her eyes became accustomed to the gloom, she made out the figure of a man squatting upon something that looked like an overturned keg or small barrel. His back was turned squarely to her so that she could not catch even a profile glimpse of his face.

Then, her eyes searching feverishly, they fell upon an object that very nearly caused her to forget the need of caution.

Lying huddled upon the floor of the cave, pushed a little further into the darkness than the man's figure, was something that appeared to be a bunch of old clothes. It moved, cried out in misery, and Dorothy knew that it was Joe.

Every instinct in her prompted her to fly to him, to take him in her arms and loose the cruel bonds that bound him.

She half rose to her feet. A sound that seemed loud to Tavia, crouching at her side, but was, in reality, only the shadow of a sound, escaped her lips.

Tavia immediately drew her down, pressed a warning hand against her lips.

"Don't spoil it all now!" she hissed. "Lie still and wait."

Dorothy nodded mutely and peered round the rock again.

Suddenly she pressed back, pushing Tavia with her behind the shelter of its huge bulk.

For the man had risen and was moving toward the entrance of the cave.

"So you think you won't, my hearty," they heard him say in his heavy, jeering tone. "Well, I am goin' to give you just one more chance before we really begin to put the screws on. This here little letter we want you to write, my lad, ain't goin' to hurt Garry Knapp none." The scoundrel

condescended to an argumentative tone and Dorothy clinched her hands fiercely.

"All you have to do is to write him a letter," the heavy voice went on, "tellin' him you will be as free as air as soon as he agrees to sell us his land—at a fair figure, mind, a very fair figure. You would be doin' him a favor, really. Think of all that cash right in his hand to-morrow, say, or the next day at the outside. You would be doin' him a favor and savin' your own skin at the same time. Come now, how about it? Let's be sensible."

Dorothy listened breathlessly for her brother's answer. She did not realize how much that answer meant to her till later when she found the imprint of her fingernails in the palms of her two hands.

"Say, I can't tell you what I think of you—I don't know words that are bad enough!" cried Joe furiously. "But I know you're a—a—bum—and I'll get even with you for this some day."

"Some day—mebbe," the man sneered. "But in the meantime this place ain't goin' to be any bed of roses for you, my lad. You gotta think of that, you know."

"I don't care, as long as I play fair with Garry," muttered the boy. "I—I—don't care what—what you do with me."

But Dorothy knew that, despite all his bravado,

Joe was only a boy and he did care. And even while her heart ached with pity, it thrilled with pride at the thought that he had stood the test, had proved himself a thoroughbred. He would "play fair" with Garry, no matter what happened.

She shrank back suddenly as Joe's tormentor brushed the rock that guarded the entrance of the cave and disappeared into the woods.

"Now, Tavia!" she whispered tensely. "Now!"

CHAPTER XXIX

THE DASTARDLY PLOT

THE two girls waited to make sure there was no one else in the cave besides Joe, listened until the sounds made by his captor crashing through the underbrush had died away.

Then Dorothy ran to him, sank to her knees beside him, laughed and cried over him as she lifted his head and held it tight against her.

"Joe, Joe! why did you run away? We've been nearly crazy, dear! No, no, don't cry, Joe darling! It's all right. Your Dorothy is here. Nothing, nothing will ever hurt you again."

Her arms tightened about him fiercely and the boy sobbed, great, tearing sobs that he was ashamed of but could not control.

The storm lasted only a minute, and then he said gruffly, big-boy fashion, to hide his weakness:

"I—you oughtn't to come near me, Dot. I—I've done an awful thing and got myself into a heap of trouble!"

"Never mind about that now, dear," cried Dorothy, suddenly recalled to the peril of their

situation. "We've got to get you away before that dreadful man comes back."

"He went off to fetch the others," said Joe, growing suddenly eager and hopeful now that rescue seemed near. "They are going to do something awful to me because I wouldn't——"

"Yes, yes, Joe, I know. But now be quiet," cried Dorothy, as she propped him up against the wall and began to work feverishly at the knots of the heavy cord that bound his feet and hands. "Some one might hear you and—oh, we must get away from here before they come back!"

"Here, I have something better than that," cried Tavia, who had been watching Dorothy's clumsy efforts to unloose Joe's bonds.

She fished frantically in the pockets of her jacket and brought forth a rather grimy ball of cord and a penknife. This she held up triumphantly.

"A good sight better than your fingers!"

"Oh, give it to me, quickly," cried Dorothy, reaching for the knife in an agony of apprehension. "Oh, it won't open! Yes, I have it!"

With the sharp blade she sawed feverishly at the cords.

They gave way one after another and she flung them on to the floor of the cave.

Joe tried to get to his feet, but stumbled and fell.

"Feel funny and numb, kind of," he muttered. "Been tied up too long, I guess."

"But, Joe, you must stand up—you must!" cried Dorothy frantically. "Come, try again. I'll hold you. You must try, Joe. They will be back in a minute! Never mind how much it hurts, stand up!"

With Dorothy's aid Joe got to his feet again slowly and painfully and stood there, swaying, an arm about his sister's shoulders, the other hand clenched tight against the damp, rocky wall of the cave.

The pain was so intense as the blood flowed back into his tortured feet that his face went white and he clenched his teeth to keep from crying out.

"Do you think you can walk at all, dear?" asked Dorothy, her own face white with the reflection of his misery. "If you could manage to walk a little way! We have horses in the woods and it would be harder for them to find us there. Try, Joe dear! Try!"

"I guess I can make it now, Sis," said Joe from between his clenched teeth. "If Tavia will help a little too—on the other side."

"I guess so!" cried Tavia with alacrity, as she put Joe's other arm about her shoulders and gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. "Now something tells me that the sooner we leave this place behind the healthier it will be for all of us."

"Hush! What's that?" cried Dorothy, and they stood motionless for a moment, listening.

"I didn't hear anything, Doro," whispered Tavia. "It was just nerves, I guess."

They took a step toward the entrance of the cave, Joe still leaning heavily upon the two girls.

A horse whinnied sharply and as they paused again, startled, a sinister shadow fell across the narrow entrance to the cave. They shrank back as substance followed shadow and a man wedged his way into the cave.

He straightened up and winked his eyes at the unexpected sight that met them.

Dorothy stifled a startled exclamation as she recognized him. It was the small, black-eyed man, Gibbons, known to Desert City as George Lightly, who stood blinking at them.

Suddenly he laughed, a short, sharp laugh, and turned back toward the mouth of the cave.

"Come on in, fellows!" he called cautiously. "Just see what I found!"

Joe's face, through the grime and dirt that covered it, had grown fiery red and he struggled to get free of Dorothy and Tavia.

"Just you let me get my hands on him!" he muttered. "I'll show him! "I'll——"

"You keep out of this, Joe," Dorothy whispered fiercely. "Let me do the talking."

Three other men squeezed through the narrow opening and stood blinking in the semi-darkness of the cave.

One of them Dorothy recognized as Joe's former captor, a big, burly man with shifty eyes and a loose-lipped mouth, another was Philo Marsh, more smug and self-sufficient than she remembered him, and the third was Cal Stiffbold, her handsome cavalier of the train ride, who had called himself Stanley Blake.

It took the girls, crouched against the wall of the cave, only a moment to see all this, and the men were no slower in reading the meaning of the situation.

Stiffbold's face was suffused with fury as he recognized Dorothy and Tavia, and he took a threatening step forward. Philo Marsh reached out a hand and drew him back, saying in mild tones:

"Easy there, Stiffbold. Don't do anything you are likely to regret."

"So, ladies to the rescue, eh?" sneered Lightly, thrusting his hands into his pockets and regarding the girls with an insulting leer. "Regular little heroines and all, ain't you? Well, now, I'll be blowed!"

"Young ladies, this isn't the place for you, you know." Philo Marsh took a step forward, reaching out his hand toward Joe. "You're interfering,

you know, and you're likely to get yourselves in a heap o' trouble. But if you'll go away and stay away and keep your mouths closed——"

"And leave my brother here with you scoundrels, I suppose?" suggested Dorothy.

The hypocritical expression upon the face of Philo Marsh changed suddenly to fury at her short, scornful laugh.

"Scoundrels, is it?" he sneered. "Well, my young lady, maybe you'll know better than to call honest people names before you leave this place."

"Honest people! You?" cried Dorothy, no longer able to contain her furious indignation. "That sounds startling coming from you, Philo Marsh, and your—honest friends!

"Do you call it honest," she took a step forward and the men retreated momentarily, abashed before her fury, "to take a poor boy away from his people, to hide him here in a place like this, to torture him physically and mentally, to attempt to make him false to all his standards of right——"

"See here, this won't do!" Lightly blustered, but Dorothy turned upon him like a tigress.

"You will listen to me till I have said what I am going to say," she flung at him. "You do all this—you honest men," she turned to the others, searing them with her scorn. "And why? So

that you can force Garry Knapp, who has the best farmlands anywhere around here—and who will make more than good some day, in spite of you, yes, in spite of you, I say—to turn over his lands to you for a song, an amount of money that would hardly pay him for the loss of one little corner of it——"

"Say, are we goin' to stand here and take this?"

"Yes, you are—Stanley Blake!" Dorothy flamed at him, and the man retreated before her fury. "And then, when this boy defies you, what do you do? Act like honest men? Of course you do! You threaten to 'put the screws on' until he is too weak to defy you, a boy against four—honest—men! If that is honesty, if that is bravery, then I would rather be like that slimy toad out in the woods who knows nothing of such things!"

"Hold on there, you!" George Lightly started forward, his hand uplifted threateningly. "You call us any more of those pretty names and I'll——"

"What will you do?" Dorothy defied him gloriously, her eyes blazing. "You dare to lay a hand upon me or my friend or my brother," instinctively her arm tightened about Joe, "and Garry Knapp will hound you to the ends of the earth. Hark! What's that?" She paused, head uplifted, listening.

They all listened in a breathless silence while the distant clatter of horses' hoofs breaking a way through the woodland came closer—ever closer!

"Garry!" Dorothy lifted her head and sent her cry ringing through the woodland. "We are over this way, Garry, over this way! Come qui——"

A HORSEMAN BROKE THROUGH THE UNDERBRUSH. IT WAS GARRY.
"Dorothy Dale to the Rescue." Page 237

CHAPTER XXX

CAPTURED

A ROUGH hand closed over Dorothy's mouth, shutting off her breath, strangling her. In an instant Tavia and Joe were similarly gagged and helpless.

There was a silence during which their captors waited breathlessly, hoping that the horseman had not heard the cry, would pass the cave by.

For a moment, remembering how well the spot was concealed, Dorothy was horribly afraid that this might actually happen. If it was really Garry coming! If he had heard her!

But the clattering hoofs still came on. She could hear the shouts of the riders, Garry's voice, calling her name!

She felt herself released with a suddenness and violence that sent her reeling toward the rear of the cave. The men were making for the entrance, jostling one another and snarling in their efforts to escape.

The men out of sight beyond the huge rock, Dorothy and Tavia rushed to the cave mouth, leaving poor Joe to limp painfully after them,

just in time to see the knaves disappear among the trees.

The next moment a horseman broke through the underbrush, charging straight for them. It was Garry!

At sight of Dorothy he pulled his horse to its haunches, drawing in his breath in a sharp exclamation.

"Dorothy! Thank heaven! I thought——"

"Never mind about us, Garry. They went over that way—the men you are after!"

She pointed in the direction the men had disappeared and Garry nodded. The next moment he had spurred his pony in pursuit, followed by several other horsemen who had come up behind him.

The girls watched them go, and Joe, coming up behind them, laid a dirty hand upon his sister's shoulder.

"You—you were great, Sis, to those men!" he said awkwardly. "I was awfully proud of you."

Dorothy smiled through tears and, taking Joe's grimy hand, pressed it against her cheek.

"It is so wonderful to have you again, dear!" she said huskily.

They were back again in a moment, Garry and his men, bringing with them two captives—the big-framed, loose-lipped fellow who had first taunted Joe in the cave, and George Lightly.

By Garry's face it was easy to see he was in no mood to deal gently with his prisoners.

He dismounted, threw the bridle to one of the men, and approached the big fellow whom he knew to be a tool of the Larrimer gang.

The fellow was sullen and glowering, but Garry was a good enough judge to guess that beneath this exterior the fellow was ready to break.

"Now then," Garry said coolly, as he pressed the muzzle of his revolver in uncomfortable proximity to the ribs of his prisoner, "you tell us what you were doing in that cave over there and you'll go scot free. Otherwise, it's jail for you—if not worse. My men," he added, in a gentle drawl, "are just hankering to take part in a lynching party. It's a right smart time since they have been treated to that sort of entertainment, and they are just ripe for a little excitement. How about it, boys, am I right?"

There came an ominous murmur from the "boys" that caused the prisoner to look up at them quickly and then down again at his shuffling feet.

Lightly tried to interfere, but Garry silenced him sharply.

"You hankering to be in this lynching party, too?" he inquired, adding gratingly: "Because if you are not, I'd advise you to keep your mouth tight shut!"

It was not long before the captive yielded to

the insistence of that revolver muzzle pressed beneath his fifth rib and made a clean breast of the whole ugly business. Possibly the invitation to the lynching party had something to do with his surrender.

As he stutteringly and sullenly revealed the plot which would have forced Garry to the sale of his lands to insure the safety of his fiancée's brother, Garry jotted down the complete confession in his notebook and at the conclusion forced both his prisoners at the point of his revolver to sign the document.

Then Garry turned to two of the cowboys, who had been looking on with appreciative grins.

"Here, Steve, and you, Gay, take these two worms to town and see that they are put where they belong," he ordered, and the two boys leaped to the task eagerly. "You others go help the boys round up the rest of the gentlemen mentioned in this valuable document," and he tapped the confession with a cheerful grin. "So long, you fellows!"

They waved their hats at him, wheeled their ponies joyfully, and were off to do his bidding.

Then it was that Garry came toward Dorothy, his arms outstretched. It is doubtful if at that moment he even saw Joe and Tavia standing there.

Dorothy took a step toward him and suddenly

the whole world seemed to rock and whirl about her. She flung out her hand and grasped nothing but air. Then down, down into fathomless space and nothingness!

Dorothy opened her eyes again to find herself in a bed whose softness and cleanliness meant untold luxury to her. Her body ached all over, horribly, and her head ached too.

She closed her eyes, but there was a movement beside the bed that made her open them again swiftly. Somebody had coughed, and it had sounded like Joe.

She turned over slowly, discovering new aches and pains as she did so, and saw that it was indeed Joe sitting there, his eyes fixed hungrily upon her.

She opened her arms and he ran to her and knelt beside the bed.

"Aw, now, don't go to crying, Sis," he said, patting her shoulder awkwardly. "They said if I bothered you they wouldn't let me stay."

"I'd like to see them get you away," cried Dorothy. "Joe, sit back a little bit and let me look at you. I can't believe it's you!"

"But I did an awful thing, Dot," he said, hanging his head. "You'd better let me tell you about it before you get too glad I'm back."

"Tell me about it then, dear," said Dorothy

quietly. "I've been wanting to know just why you ran away."

"It was all because of the fire at Haskell's toy store," said Joe, speaking swiftly, as though he would be glad to get the explanation over. "Jack Popella said the explosion was all my fault and he told me I would be put in prison——"

"But just what *did* you do?" Dorothy insisted.

"Well, it was like this." Joe took a long breath, glanced up at her, then turned his eyes away again. "Jack had a fight with Mr. Haskell over some money he picked up in the road. Mr. Haskell said he stole it from his cash drawer, but Jack kept on saying he found it in the road. I shouldn't wonder if he did steal it though, at that," Joe went on, thoughtfully, and for the first time Dorothy looked at him accusingly.

"You know I begged you not to have anything to do with Jack Popella, Joe."

The lad hung his head and flushed scarlet.

"I know you did. I won't ever, any more."

"All right, dear. Tell me what happened then."

"Jack was so mad at Mr. Haskell he said he would like to knock down all the boxes in the room back of his store just to get even. He asked me to help him and—just for fun—I said sure I would. Then he told me to go on in and get started and he would come in a minute.

"I knocked down a couple of boxes," Joe con-

tinued, after a strained silence. "And then—the explosion came. Jack said I was to blame and —the—the cops were after me. I wasn't going to let them send me to prison," he lifted his head with a sort of bravado and met Dorothy's gaze steadily. "So—so I came out West to Garry."

"And you are going back again with me, Joe," said his sister firmly. "It was cowardly to run away. Now you will have to face the music!"

Joe hung his head for a moment, then squared his shoulders and looked bravely at Dorothy.

"All right, Dot. I guess it was kind of sneaking to run away. I—I'm awful sorry."

The door opened softly behind them and Tavia poked her head in.

"My goodness gracious, Doro Doodlekins," she cried, "you look as bright as a button. First thing you know I'll be minus a patient."

Dorothy propped herself up on her elbow and stared at her chum.

"Tavia, we must send a telegram immediately," she cried. "The Major must know that Joe is safe."

Tavia came over and smoothed her pillow fondly.

"Foolish child, did you think no one but you would think of that?" she chided. "Garry sent one of the boys to Dugonne with orders to send a night letter to The Cedars telling everything

that happened. That was after you fainted, you know, and we brought you here."

"Such a foolish thing to do," sighed Dorothy, sinking back on her pillow. "What must Garry think of me?"

"Suppose I let him answer that for himself," suggested the flyaway, and before Dorothy could protest she had seized Joe by the arm and escorted him gently from the room. A moment later Dorothy could hear Tavia calling to Garry that he was "needed very much upstairs."

Dorothy closed her eyes and opened them the next minute to find Garry standing beside the bed, looking down at her. She reached out a hand to him and he took it very gently, kneeling down beside her.

"Joe and Tavia have been telling me how you stood up to those men in the cave, little girl. I only wish I had been there to see you do it. We've got them all, by the way, and Stiffbold and Lightly and the rest of them are where they won't hatch any more schemes in a hurry—thanks to you."

"Thanks to me?" repeated Dorothy, wondering. "Garry, why?"

"I never would have discovered that cave if I hadn't heard you call out," Garry explained. "That hole in the mountainside was the coziest little retreat I ever saw."

"Well, I'm glad if I helped a little," sighed

Dorothy. "I was afraid you might be going to scold me."

"Scold you?" repeated Garry tenderly. "You foolish, little brick!"

It was a long time before Garry remembered something that had once seemed important to him. With an exclamation of dismay he stuck his hand in his pocket and drew forth a yellow envelope.

"Here's a telegram from The Cedars, and I clean forgot all about it," he said penitently. "One of the boys brought it from Dugonne where he went to send the telegram to Major Dale. I didn't mean to keep it, honest I didn't!"

"Under the circumstances, I don't blame you in the least," said Dorothy demurely, as she hastily tore open the telegram.

She read it through, then turned to Garry with shining eyes.

"This is the one thing I needed to make me perfectly happy, Garry," she said. "Nat says that Jack Popella has been arrested for setting Haskell's store on fire. That automatically clears Joe of suspicion!"

"That's great. The poor kid has had more than his share of worry lately. Just wait till he reads that telegram." And to Tavia, passing the door at that moment, he gave the yellow sheet

with the request that she convey it to Joe with all possible speed.

"Just to be comfortable and safe and happy once more," murmured Dorothy, as Garry came back to her. "It seems very wonderful, Garry."

"And my job," said Garry softly, "will be to keep you safe and comfortable and happy for the rest of your life!"

THE END

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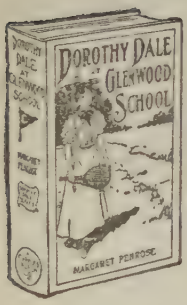

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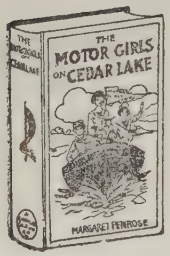

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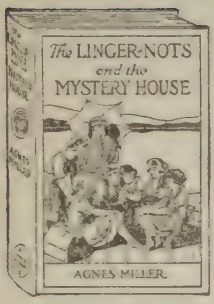

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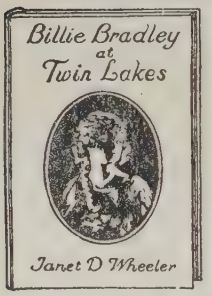

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